

The BOY *from the* WEST



GILBERT PATTEN

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THE BOY FROM THE WEST



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“ The undaunted boy tore the paper to pieces.”

(See page 58)

The Boy from the West

BY
GILBERT PATTEN

AUTHOR OF

"The Boy Cattle King," "Don Kirk's Mine," "Rockspur Nine," etc.



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THE BOY FROM THE WEST.

CHAPTER I.

MISPLACED CONFIDENCE.

“Look out!”

This sharp cry was followed closely by the shrill, warning whistle of the New York Express.

“Stop that horse!”

“They’ll be killed!”

Although these horrified exclamations broke from the lips of the spectators on the station platform, not one of the speakers possessed the courage or presence of mind to check the animal that was whirling two human beings toward a sudden and violent death.

The mid-afternoon express did not stop at Burnham Junction unless flagged, and, being seven minutes behind time, it was rushing through the village at a speed that raised a cloud of whirling dust at each crossing.

An odd-looking boy who had been sitting on a bench at the end of the depot, apparently half asleep, arose to his feet with the first cry. On the opposite side of the railroad he saw a horse dashing madly down the sloping road toward the crossing, dragging a light carriage, in which were seated two white-faced persons.

It seemed that the carriage would reach the crossing one second before the train, in which case it would be dashed to pieces by the engine.

Not a sound came from the boy's lips; but he ran forward at a loping gait that seemed dreadfully slow, but was really very deceptive, and crossed the track in front of the express.

He was barely in time to grasp the horse by the bit, and then came a most astonishing display of strength and skill, for he stopped the animal within a space less than twelve feet.

As it was, he had not another foot to spare for, as he set the creature back on its haunches and whirled it aside, the first car of the flying train brushed his shoulder and he was enveloped in a whirlwind of dust and sand.

With a grip of iron, the strange lad held the horse steady until the last car flashed along, and then, when the danger was past, he calmly drawled:

"Wa-al, of all the fool tricks I ever saw, this yar trying to run over a train of cars takes the lead."

The driver of the horse, a man of middle age, rather a rough-looking fellow, bridled instantly, although his voice was a trifle unsteady, as he hotly retorted:

"You're a smart younker, you be! You came nigh gettin' us all killed! If you'd let the hoss alone, we'd got over the crossin' ahead of the train, an'——"

"That will do, sir," cuttingly interrupted the person by the driver's side, who was a boy a year or two older than the one who had stopped the horse. "You have been drinking, and we both escaped death by a miracle. You have failed to get me here in time to catch the express, and this ends my dealings with you."

Having said this, the boy, who was dressed something like a dandy, and carried a stout cane, jumped from the carriage to the ground.

He was a stout, well-built lad, with dark eyes and hair, a proud face, and haughty bearing. There were

costly rings on his fingers, a diamond pin in his cravat, and a heavy gold chain strung across his vest. A character reader would have said he possessed a very passionate disposition, having a flashy temper that was not readily curbed.

The driver's face, that had been pale a short time before, now flushed with anger.

"You agreed to give me ten dollars——"

"If you got me here in time to catch the express," broke in the boy of the dark eyes. "You failed."

"Well, I s'pose you'll pay the reg'ler price for the team?"

"Then you make a big mistake. No such a bargain was made. You won't get a cent."

"I'll collect it of yer dad. He's rich an'——"

"Get it—if you can. That's all."

And then the speaker turned to the lad who had saved him from being killed, saying rather stiffly:

"I have to thank you for what you did, and——"

"That yar's all right, partner," was the offhand retort. "I didn't like to see you walked over by the cars, and so I took a hand. I don't ask any thanks for a little thing like that."

"A *little* thing! You do not seem to realize what you have done. Come over to the station. As I missed the express, I'll have to take the mixed train back to Somerset Falls."

"That's the trail I'm bound over."

The two boys crossed the track, paying no attention to the crowd that was gathering about them, or to the driver of the carriage, who was giving vent to some very violent language.

The boy who had stopped the horse presented a great contrast to the one he had saved; for he was dressed in the very plainest of clothes, wearing long-legged boots,

into the tops of which his pantaloons were carelessly thrust. He wore a woolen shirt, with a wide collar, beneath which a tie was knotted, but had on neither coat nor vest. About his waist was a heavy leather belt, from which a coiled horsehair lasso hung at one side; and there were holsters for revolvers on either hip, although they were empty now. On his head was a wide-brimmed Stinson sombrero, the band being thrust full of cartridges.

In fact, he was dressed like a cowboy from the West, and he had the air of a cowboy. Not the fancy cowboy who gets himself up in flashy attire and poses in a museum for twelve dollars a week, but the genuine, unpretending article, such as may be found on the great cattle ranches of Kansas or Texas.

He was a trifle heavy and awkward in his manner, seeming rather ill at ease in the presence of the dandified youth he had saved from a frightful disaster.

The mixed train for Somerset Falls, which had been standing on a siding, now backed in on the main track, as was the usual custom as soon as the express had passed.

Somerset Falls was located ten miles away, at the termination of a branch road that was being built through to Clareford, a promising manufacturing town. The road had been completed as far as Somerset Falls the previous year; but an unfortunate legal complication had stopped it there, although the Falls was no more than a village of six or eight houses, being absolutely of no importance save as the nearest railway station to Clareford.

The boys made haste to get inside the one passenger car as soon as possible, so they could escape from the staring eyes of the country people who had witnessed the exciting incident described earlier in this chapter.

Much to their relief, the train was all "made up," and it soon started. There were only five passengers besides themselves.

"I take it you are from the West?" observed the lad of the dark hair and eyes, after they had chatted until they became fairly well acquainted.

"Hit it plumb center first shot," returned the other, with unassumed heartiness. "I reckon I must look to the people round these yar parts about as a tenderfoot looks to us when he shows up out West for the first time."

"Where are you from?"

"Kansas."

"Come East for pleasure?"

"No; business."

"It can't be possible you are going to Somerset Falls on business?"

"Wa-al," smiled the boy from the West, "I don't expect to hang round that yar place long. I'm going on to Lake Kenshaw."

The lad with the dark eyes started.

"I came through from Lake Kenshaw to-day," he asserted. "Missed the train at Somerset Falls, and agreed to pay ten dollars to catch the express. You know how I lost it, and, as there is not another New York passenger until midnight, I am going back to the lake."

"Then we can hang together till we get thar. I say, know a man by the name of Cyrus Stark, who is up that way fishing?"

Again the city lad started slightly.

"Stark—Cyrus Stark?" he repeated. "Seems to me I know of the gentleman."

The boy from the West straightened up stiffly.

"Maybe he's the kind what you call gentleman here

in the East," he said; "but out West we'd call him an onery swindler. Look here!" with a sudden burst of confidence, "that yar man swindled my mother out of a fortune! Gentleman! Wa-al, if he *is*, I don't admire the breed."

The face of the listening lad flushed, and he bit his lip; but he managed to speak with assumed calmness.

"Swindled your mother? How?"

"Wa-al, you see, this Stark and my father were partners in some ventures before father died. Stark tried to buy the White Horse Mine, but he didn't work the riffle. When father was killed by a blast as he was goin' through the mine one day, Stark came up with papers that seemed to prove his right to the property. I don't know much about law, but there was a suit, and he beat mother out of her eye teeth. I reckon lawyers, judge and jury were well paid for their decision. Anyhow, I know the whole business was crooked, *my name isn't Bart Stone.*"

"Seems to me I have heard of this White Horse Mine," muttered the listening boy. "It proved a failure, didn't it?"

"The lead was lost."

"Something like that."

"Yep. They abandoned the mine—it's been deserted for near two years. Say, can I trust you?"

"What a question! Of course."

"Wa-al, I went through that yar mine less than four weeks ago, and what do you think I found, pard?"

"Give it up."

"I found the lost lead. That's what brings me on here. Mother raised five thousand dollars, and sent me to see if I can buy the stock of Cyrus Stark. He holds it all, and it's said he'd be glad to take any price for it. If I can get it back, I'll feel as if I was pretty

near squar' with him—and I reckon, if the whole black truth was known, you'd see I have more reasons than I have told you yet for wanting to get squar'."

"And that's why you are going to Lake Kenshaw?"

"Yep. I want to get at Mr. Stark before he hears anything about the lead being found again."

At this moment, a brakeman thrust his head in at the car door, calling:

"Somerset Falls—Somerset."

The city boy arose to his feet, a sarcastic smile on his face, observing:

"My dear Mr. Stone, you are altogether too new for this part of the country. As long as you have told me all this without asking my name, I advise you to go back to your Kansas home and give over all hope of purchasing the stock of the White Horse Mine. It will save you a great deal of useless trouble."

"Your name!" gasped the astonished boy from the West. "What *is* your name?"

As the train came to a stop, the other replied:

"It is Walter St. Omer Stark—and Cyrus Stark is my father."

CHAPTER II.

THE RACE FOR THE MINE.

"I'LL—be—kicked!"

Bart Stone faintly muttered the words, staring at his late companion, who was deliberately walking from the car.

"What a big fool a big fool is! I've been and blowed the whole thing to him, and he's Stark's son! That dishes me!"

However, he was not the boy to give up so easily, and he leaped to his feet, crying:

"Stop! Hold on! I want to talk with you a bit, partner!"

Instead of heeding the call, Walter St. Omer Stark quickened his steps and left the car.

Bart had started to his feet, and he now hurried after the other boy. He reached the platform just in time to see Walter Stark disappear on the run around a corner of the small depot.

"Running like a coyote! Here's after him! He's got to be mighty lively on the hoof to get away from me."

The young cowboy dashed forward in the loping way peculiar to him when he ran, covering the ground in a surprising manner, for all of his heavy boots.

As he came around the corner of the station, he saw Walter Stark running swiftly and gracefully down the street. Walter turned his head, and Bart fancied there was a defiant, triumphant smile on his haughty face,

"He thinks I don't know split-hoofs from whole—and he's just about right. All the same, he'll have to hurry right along, now I've got my peepers opened a bit. It's win or lose, and I an't hyar for my health."

The boy from the West knew well enough that his late companion was running for the nearest place to obtain a horse, and, so he followed.

Walter was a remarkably swift runner, and yet the pursuing lad, for all of his loping gait, managed to hold his own. He saw the rich man's son turn in at the first house he reached. When Bart came up, running easily, he was just in time to hear a red-headed man, who was standing in the open stable door, saying:

"No, Bill an't back from Burnham yit. Thought you was goin' to New York. How'd you git back so soon?"

"Missed the express at Burnham, and came back on the afternoon mixed. Must have a horse to get to the lake. Where can I find one?"

"Wull," mumbled the old fellow, deliberately gnawing at a plug of black tobacco, "I dunno. It's purty certun ye can't git a hoss around here onless Steve Jones will let his."

"Where does Steve Jones live?"

"Third house down the next block. You'll find——
Wull, I snum!"

This concluding exclamation was caused by the astonishing swiftness with which Walter Stark turned and dashed away.

Bart had overheard all this; but he was not quite so swift in his movements as the other boy, and, as a result, Stark darted past him.

"Hyar! Hold on! Wa-al, go it! I'm comin', and I can hoof it a bit!"

Only one chance of getting a horse! The boy who

reached Steve Jones' first would succeed, and the other lad would be left.

"Got to do it; so here goes!"

Bart ground the words through his teeth, as he settled down to run for all he was worth.

Walter Stark was famous as an amateur sprinter and his astonishment can be imagined when he found the slow-going cowboy, encumbered as he was with heavy boots, forging along by his side and threatening to pass him.

"What are you running for, you fool?" he snapped, turning his dark eyes—now flashing with anger—on the boy from the West.

"Oh, just for fun!" was the drawled reply. "I may be a fool, but thar's bigger ones to be corraled any day. You an't seen me woke up yet, partner; I'm worse'n a long-horn on the rampage."

"Do you expect to get ahead of *me*?"

"Wa-al, I expect to try mighty hard. I'll bet a good hawse I do——"

"I'll take the bet!"

Whack! With a swift and unexpected movement, Walter Stark lifted the heavy cane he had clung to all this time and brought it down on Bart's head, using all the strength of his muscular arm.

It was a fortunate thing for Bart Stone, that he wore a heavy felt hat on his head, for had it been otherwise, the cane might have fractured his skull. As it was, the blow dropped him face downward in the dust, where he lay quite still, making no move to get up.

When Walter saw the result of his savage blow, his face paled, and he half halted, gasping:

"I hope I didn't kill the fellow! That would be awful! No, he stirs—he's all right!"

Then the rich man's son hurried onward again, leav-

ing the victim of his dastardly blow still stretched in the dust of the road.

How long Bart lay there he could not tell; but he finally opened his eyes, sat up and looked around, somewhat dazed.

"Was I kicked by a mule? or what was it happened?" he muttered, staring at the unfamiliar scenes of the quiet country about him. "My head feels like thar was a stampede of spilt-hoofs inside it. Whar am I, anyway?"

It took him some moments to collect his scattered wits; but he finally remembered all that had happened.

"Wonder how long I've laid hyar on the trail?" he mumbled, as he arose to his feet, gathering up his lasso, which had become detached from where it was suspended at his waist. "Maybe Mr. Walter St. Omer Stark has reached his father by this time—maybe not! Perhaps I can stop him, and get the start if I hustle. Here goes!" Unmindful of the throbbing pain in his head, he ran down the street once more, holding the lariat in his hands.

"Third house around the corner, came from his dry lips. "One, two, three—hyar it is!"

At that moment a boy, mounted on a spirited little bay mare, rode out from the stable that sat back from the house. He saw Bart coming down the road at a run, and a laugh broke from his lips.

"The wild boy from the West has a hard head, but there's nothing in it," he chuckled, allowing the little mare to canter out to the road, where he checked her and awaited the approach of the lad he felt he had outwitted.

Bart's eyes were filled with a desperate light, as he approached, and he made some preparations which Walter Stark did not note.

The rich man's son sat still on the horse until Bart was quite close, and then he called out tauntingly:

"Things move in this part of the country, and you are altogether too slow. Better take my advice, go back home, and stick to your cattle. That's the kind of society you're best adapted to. Good-by."

He touched the little mare with a whip he held, and she wheeled to bound away.

Bart Stone was still running forward, and something was circling about his head. Of a sudden it darted out, and the noose of the horsehair lasso dropped about the neck of the little mare.

The instant he made the cast, Bart had leaped to one side of the road and taken a turn of the lasso about a stone hitching-post.

As a result, the little mare was stopped with a suddenness that nearly hurled her forward on her nose. Walter Stark was sent flying through the air, to land heavily in the dirt of the road, bewildered, dazed, astounded.

Choked by the noose, trembling in every limb, the bay mare stood still, probably wondering what had happened to check her so abruptly and rudely.

"Whoa—easy!" called Bart, as he released the lasso and reached the side of the horse.

With his hand on the animal's bridle, he knew he was master of the situation.

A light spring from the ground took him to the saddle; but he held the prancing creature in check with one hand, while other skillfully coiled the faithful horsehair lariat.

Walter Stark sat up in the dust of the road just in time to see the bay mare canter easily past him, with the boy from the West on her back.

Bart turned in the saddle to wave his hand at the

humiliated rich man's son, calling back, in an aggravating drawl:

“I’ll think over that yar advice of yours, partner, and maybe I’ll take it, if I conclude you was right. But you can’t always tell how fast a hawse can trot by counting its ribs. Good-by!”

CHAPTER III.

TOO LATE.

"MR. STARK, if you can spare me the time, I want to talk over a little business with you."

"Business, business! This is no place for business, young man! I came here to escape business—I am here to fish. No, sir; I will not discuss business of any sort."

The words filled Bartley Stone with despair. After passing through so many adventures, and riding on horseback from Somerset Falls to Lake Kenshaw, was he to be baffled simply because this man had resolved not to be bothered with business for the time?

Unless he could induce Cyrus Stark to talk business immediately, he felt sure he would utterly fail in his purpose, as a short delay would be pretty certain to make the man aware of the truth about the White Horse Mine, now known to his son.

And still it would not do to let him know the matter was of serious importance, for then he might suspect the truth, and refuse to negotiate at all.

"I have come a long distance to see you, sir, and——"

"That is nothing to me. I have come a long distance to avoid all bother of business. Physician told me I must—said it was imperative. And you're only a boy. I never transact business with a minor. That settles it, sir."

"It is about the White Horse Mine, Mr. Stark."

The millionaire started and looked the boy over with a slight show of interest.

"That? Why, it's petered out—no good—failed. You're from the West?"

"Yes, sir. I know the lead of that yar mine was lost; but I've been down the shaft, and I reckon I can make it pay on a small scale by working over the abandoned vein. I'm willing to take the venture, if I can buy the right to the mine."

"Won't be any trouble about that. Go ahead and dig around in the old shaft as much as you like."

And Cyrus Stark settled back in the hammock spread beneath the trees close by a pretty cottage that stood on the shore of the lake, puffing at his half-smoked cigar.

But Bart was not be dismissed in such a manner.

"I had rather do this thing in a business way," he said. "I have heard the shares of the mine have no quoted value, and that you hold them all. If they can be bought for a small pile, so I can make something out of working the old veins, why I'm hyar to buy them."

"And you bother me over such a trifling matter? I won't have it! The stock is in the hands of my attorney, Jubal Heep, No. 73 Broadway, New York City; and he has full authority to dispose of it. Go to him! I'm done! Won't say another word about it!"

The effort to get anything further out of Mr. Stark proved fruitless; but he had said quite enough to give the boy from the West an idea of the proper course to pursue.

"To Jubal Heep I'll go," he thought. "If I can reach him before he receives a hint of the truth, I may corral this yar stock, after all."

Five minutes later he was riding through the dusk of on-coming night, Lake Kenshaw at his back.

The little bay mare was a wiry animal, for she did not seem to mind the effect of the sharp pace at which she had covered the six miles between Somerset Falls and Lake Kenshaw; and she was as spirited and ready as ever when headed back toward the town.

Bart was a pretty hard rider; but he found no occasion for urging the little horse. The roads were bad in that section, and it was his chief outlook that the mare received no injury.

He wondered how he would reach Burnham Junction, knowing there was a midnight passenger train for New York which he might catch, if he could get there on time.

"I'll hoof it," was his plucky resolve. "I can do it all right. This hawse must be left at Somerset Falls, or else I may be taken for a hawse thief."

The lights of the little town were twinkling from the windows of the houses when he rode down the dusty street where Walter Stark had been humiliated that afternoon.

He had noticed a store and post office near the depot, and thither he went, having decided to leave the horse at that place. As he rode up, two men came out of the store. They saw him, and one of them started forward, crying:

"That's the boy! That's my hoss! Catch him!"

Bart immediately realized he was in great danger of being detained there, which would certainly baffle him utterly in his attempt to reach Jubal Heep before the attorney was notified not to sell the shares of the White Horse Mine.

"Off the trail! Clear the way for a stampede! Hyar goes the whole bunch!" Swish! the coiled lasso hissed

through the air, and cut across the flank of the little mare, causing her to leap forward and shoot past the man who had bounded out to grasp her bit.

"Can't stop for little matters now," came through Bart's clinched teeth. "Got to make Burnham in time to catch them idnight passenger. I've got the name of lifting a hawse, and so I may as well ride the critter to Burnham."

He knew there was little danger of immediate pursuit, for there were not any spare horses in Somerset Falls, as a rule.

Twice he was obliged to stop and inquire concerning the road to Burnham; but he reached the junction with nearly two hours to spare before midnight.

He rode direct to a livery stable, where the horse was delivered; and he left ten dollars to pay for the use of the animal, stating it belonged to Steve Jones, of Somerset Falls, who would call for it.

Then he went down to the railroad station, where he found a telegraph office, but was informed there was no line running to Somerset Falls.

The post office and stores of the town were closed; but he "borrowed" a sheet of paper and an envelope of the station agent, and proceeded to write a letter to Mr. Jones, telling the man where he would find his horse and money to remunerate him for the use of the animal.

The station agent sold him a stamp, and, when the letter was completed, sealed, and dropped into the mailbox at the depot, he breathed easier.

"Hanged if I don't feel something like a hawse thief!" he muttered, as he walked up and down the platform. "Never did anything like that before, but I just *had* to this time. Wonder whar that yar Walter Stark is."

He soon found out, for a carriage containing three

persons—two men and a boy—whirled up to the station about thirty minutes before the midnight passenger was due; and Bart, who was standing in the darkness at one corner of the building, recognized the lad as the rich man's son whom he had outwitted.

Walter Stark and one of the men entered the station, and Bart hurried to a window that was standing open. There he heard himself described and inquiries made as to whether he had been seen by the station agent. The agent said such a boy had certainly been there, but he was gone then.

"Did he purchase a ticket here?" anxiously asked the son of the millionaire.

"No."

"And you don't know where he went?"

"I do not. What has he done?"

"Stolen a horse," was the reply. "I have a warrant for his arrest, and the sheriff is with me to serve it. If he shows up here again, detain him, and I'll pay you twenty-five dollars. But he's a perfect young ruffian. You want to look out for him."

With that, Walter Stark and the sheriff hurriedly left the depot and once more entered the carriage, being driven rapidly away.

Bart hoped he had seen the last of them; but he took care to keep out of sight until the midnight train whistled. As the train drew up at the station, he got on the last car.

Just then the carriage containing Walter Stark whirled up to the station again, and the boy sprang out, rushed forward and boarded the train, as it was beginning to move.

"He's on his way to see Jubal Heep," thought the boy from the West. "Somehow he has got word to his father, and has sent him to get ahead of me."

This made Bart feel anything but pleasant, as he entered the car and sat down. He half hoped Walter Stark would come along, see him, and pick a quarrel. Although he knew it was but natural young Stark should look out for his father's interests, he could not forgive the fellow for knocking him down with the cane, after being indebted to him for the preservation of his life. He did not go through the cars in search for Walter, and the boys were not fated to meet on the journey to New York City, which was reached early in the morning.

From the Grand Central Station Bart took the Third Avenue elevated downtown, crossing City Hall Park in the dusky light of morning, scarcely giving a glance to the settees of drowsing bums and unfortunates who had no other place to spend the night.

The number of Jubal Heep's office was reached long before the building was opened for the morning; and the anxious and excited boy could do nothing but walk up and down the sidewalk before the door, waiting until Heep should appear.

He well knew Walter Stark might proceed direct to the home of the attorney, which was unknown to Bart, and thus easily ruin his prospects; but, for all of this, he could do nothing.

People began to hurry along the street to stores and offices, heavy trucks rumbled over the pavement, and the surface cars were gradually filled until at last they were crowded. Then the janitor came and opened the building. From him Bart learned the number of Jubal Heep's office, and he walked up the stairs until he found the door.

There he waited. It seemed as if the man would never appear. Other offices were opened all about, and there was a general air of business all through the

building by ten o'clock; but it was fully thirty minutes after ten before a nervous little man, with black whiskers and a nose like the beak of a hawk, unlocked the door of Heep's room.

Bart entered, and the man looked at him inquiringly, seeming slightly surprised at his curious and unusual appearance.

"Can I do anything for you, young man?" he inquired, in a raspy, file-like voice.

"I—I'm hyar to see Mr. Jubal Heep," faltered the lad.

"You are looking at him now. What's your business?"

Bart had intended to approach the matter cautiously, and in a manner that could not arouse the attorney's suspicions; but Heep's brusqueness disconcerted him, and he answered:

"I've come to see if I can corral the shares of the White Horse Mine."

"Corral them? What's that?"

"Buy them, I mean, sir."

"Hum! Talk English, young man. You're too late."

"Too late!" gasped Bart, his heart sinking. "What do you mean?"

"The stock's no good in this country—isn't worth a penny. So, being instructed by Mr. Stark, the owner, to get rid of it at any price, I decided to send it to England and spring it on the blooming Britishers."

"And——"

"It's in the hands of an agent. He sailed for England yesterday on the Majestic."

CHAPTER IV.

FAIRLY BALKED.

BART actually staggered, as if he had been struck a heavy blow in the face.

"Sent to England?" he faintly muttered. "Gone! I'm done for!"

The man looked at him in astonishment, rubbing his beak-like nose with one white forefinger.

"You seem broke up," he observed. "What's the matter? What did you want of the stock?"

The boy from the West straightened up, determined not to let the lawyer know how hard he was really hit. It was not an easy thing to do; but he forced a smile to his face, even though it proved to be a somewhat sickly one.

"Wa-al," he said, speaking with his habitual drawl, "you see it's like this: My father used to own that yar mine, and——"

"Your father?" exclaimed Jubal Heep. "Is it possible you are the son of Norman Stone, who was accidentally killed in the mine by a premature blast?"

"I am his son, sir."

"Well, I don't see what you can want of that petered-out hole in the ground. You ought to know enough to be aware there is nothing in it."

"I know the lead was lost, sir; but I was through the mine a few weeks ago, while on a trip into Colerader, and I reckoned I could make something by working over the old vein. I may be wrong. Some

people out whar I live say I don't know shucks; but I'm willing to buy the stock, if I can get it cheap enough, and try to see what I can make out of the old mine."

"You'd be stuck, and stuck bad, boy. Why, experts failed to find a trace of the lost lead, and they said the mine was utterly worked out. If you've got any money you mean to put into that piece of property, thank your good fortune Ira Wilson has sacked the shares to London."

"So Ira Wilson is the name of the man who has them?"

"Yes."

"What's his business?"

Jubal Heep grinned craftily, again rubbing his nose with one forefinger, a movement that somehow seemed sinister and offensive to the lad.

"His business? Oh, he's an agent—a promoter—a catcher of suckers."

Bart did not fail to understand this.

"And has he gone to England for the express purpose of selling them yar shares to suckers over thar?"

"Not much!" was the scornful answer.

"He wouldn't tinker with anything so small. He had a dozen schemes on hand, and I induced him to see what he could do with the old mine. Britishers are particularly anxious just now to sink their good money in any kind of mining property in this country; and I thought Wilson might be able to get something out of the shares. Told him to dispose of them at any price. He's to have a commission, so he'll do his best. Maybe he won't be able to do anything. If not, Stark better burn the worthless old papers."

"But I can't spend any more time with you, boy. Just go back home, and think yourself in luck."

Bart, however, declined to be dismissed in such a manner.

"Is it not still possible for me to purchase the stock of you?" he questioned, knowing whatever he did must be done without further delay.

"You don't want it."

"Yes, I do, sir."

"Well, you're not half as smart as I took you to be—and that's saying a good deal."

The boy flushed, but held his temper, for all of this uncomplimentary declaration.

"I will pay you for the shares now," he said; "and you can cable to that yar agent of yours not to dispose of them. He'd get the message as soon as he arrives."

"I can't do business with you; you're only a boy."

"I'm my own master, Mr. Heep; and I've got the rocks in my pocket."

"The rocks?"

"The dust—stuff—money."

The lawyer was immediately interested, and he rubbed his beak with renewed vigor, a cunning twinkle entering his eyes. If this boy was still fool enough to buy the worthless shares, why not sell them to him?

"How much money have you, young man?"

"How much will you take for the shares?"

"Oh, well, you must know we do not propose to sell them for nothing, as Wilson may make a big strike with them. It will be useless for you to offer an insignificant sum. A few hundred dollars are no object, and I do not suppose you have more than a hundred or so?"

Jubal Heep was trying to sound him.

"I will pay you five hundred dollars, spot cash for the shares, mister; and that yar's business," said Bart in his deliberate way.

The lawyer laughed.

"I knew it would be useless to discuss the matter with you. Five hundred dollars! Why, I wouldn't take the trouble to cable Wilson for that sum!

"Come! If you really have any money, make a fair kind of an offer. Speak up!"

"It won't be any use to try to make the old mine pay if I have to give too much for her," was Bart's cautious reply. "You know well enough it's no bonanza. What'll you take?"

"You want me to set a price?"

"That's about it."

"Well, then, you may have those shares for the sum of——"

"One hundred thousand dollars!"

These words came from a third person, who had quietly entered the office just in time to catch what the lawyer was saying.

"Walter Stark!" gasped the boy from the West, in blank dismay, as his eyes rested on this person.

"Right you are," came from the lips of the haughty youth, who regarded the other lad with the utmost contempt. "I overslept myself this morning, and you came near stealing a march on me; but it seems I am still in time to block the game."

"You—you—" choked Bart.

"Now, don't go to calling names, my cow-punching friend! You may get yourself into trouble if you do!"

"And I saved you from being killed!"

"I suppose you expect pay for that. Well, I'll give you a tenner, and call it square."

"Don't do it! It's a blamed sight more'n that yar neck of yours is worth!"

The son of the millionaire turned pale with anger, starting forward, his hands clinched, savagely grating:

"You insolent puppy! I've a mind to give you a good thumping!"

"Come ahead," drawled Bart, his hands on his hips, apparently quite unprepared for an assault.

"Hold on!" grated Jubal Heep, stepping between them. "I'll have no scrapping in this office! What's the meaning of this, anyway, Mr. Stark?"

"It means this fellow has been trespassing in the mine, and pretends he has discovered the lost lead. That is why he is so anxious to buy the stock. It will be a very good plan to hold on to it until we learn if there is anything in his discovery."

"Bosh! This boy discovered the lead, after the experts failed? I don't take any stock in that."

"At the same time, I have directions from my father to notify you not to dispose of the stock."

"I have sent it to England."

"Sent it? When?"

"Yesterday. The agent sailed on the Majestic"

"Then he must be notified as soon as he lands not to let go of the stock until he receives further instructions. Will you see to it?"

"Certainly, if you say so."

"I do. As for this smart boy from the wild and woolly West, he is not in it at all. But I am satisfied with breaking him this way. He gave me a nasty throw yesterday, and I'll yet have satisfaction for that."

Trembling with anger and despair, Bart cried:

"Any time you want satisfaction, just sail right in, Mr. Walter St. Omer Stark! I'll agree to give you all yer want—and a little more!"

Young Stark smiled sneeringly.

"You do not know my record, cow-puncher. I'm the champion amateur boxer of the Trojan Club, and

I knocked out Bob Plummer, the professional, in a fair and square set-to. I'd do you up while you was catching your breath. Remember what I said: You are altogether too slow for the East. Take a tumble to yourself and go back where you belong, or you'll be captured by some dime museum manager and caged for a freak."

Bart was tempted to launch himself at the sneering and insolent lad, but, by a strong effort, he held his passion in check, deliberately saying:

"Maybe the time'll come when I'll make you swaller that yar bluff! I may be a little slow, but I have a way of getting around sometimes. You'll hear from me again, and you won't be pleased none whatever. Good-day."

He abruptly left the lawyer's office, Walter Stark's hateful and sneering laugh ringing in his ears.

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CHAPTER V.

HOT AFTER THE STOCK.

"I FEEL like I'd been run down by a stampeded herd!" muttered the unlucky boy from the West, as he descended the stairs, utterly regardless of the elevator. "And it's all my fault! I deserve it for letting my mouth loose and telling all I knew. That was the worst thing I ever did."

His aspect was certainly that of a crushed and crestfallen boy; and he was so heedless when he reached the street, now thronging with life, that he ran into several persons, being sharply rebuked for his awkwardness in one instance.

After a time, he realized he was hungry, and he sought a restaurant, where a square meal was ordered and eaten. Indeed, for all his misfortune, his appetite was so voracious the waiter stood gazing at him in amazement.

Being unaccustomed to the ways of the East, he made several blunders that caused those who saw him to smile, and brought an abashed flush to his own cheeks.

Having satisfied his appetite and paid the bill, he left the restaurant and was soon on Broadway once more. Scarcely knowing why he did so, he took a surface car for uptown, getting off at Fourteenth Street, and walking northward.

Naturally, he attracted a great deal of notice, being attired in a manner quite unusual for Broadway; but

he paid no attention to the stares and smiles of the crowd, his mind occupied with thoughts of his own affairs. Suddenly, however, as he reached Twenty-third street, these words aroused him to a sense of his surroundings:

"Hello, old man! Thought you'd sailed. Heard you were going on the Majestic."

"So I was intending. My passage was paid and stateroom engaged; but I was in that little smash on the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western."

"You don't say! Escaped all right? Hurt any way?"

"Not hurt; but I missed the Majestic."

Bart heard all this, and he looked the two men over with interest. The one who had missed the steamer was a rather dashy, bright-appearing young man, with a shrewd face and a reddish mustache that had lately been curled by a barber. He was well dressed, and carried a large leather grip in his hand.

"Missed the Majestic!" thought the boy from the West. "What if he——"

He scarcely dared think of that; but he resolved not to let the young man with the grip get out of sight.

The two men talked a few moments more and then they parted, the one Bart was watching crossing Twenty-third Street.

The boy followed, in terror lest the stranger should disappear in the moving throng. A block of teams shut in between the man and the lad, and it appeared as if fate would baffle Bart then and there.

"You can't stop me in this yar way!" he muttered somewhat fiercely.

The next moment, he astounded the spectators and nearly paralyzed a policeman by leaping to the back of a horse attached to a heavy truck, springing to the

animal's mate, and dropping lightly to the ground, quickly darting into the crowd.

He was again close after the man with the leather grip, and this individual was pursued directly to the Fifth Avenue Hotel, where he walked up to the clerk's desk and registered, receiving a room.

The man's grip was taken by a colored porter, and, as he followed the servant to the elevator, Bart slipped up and looked at the name written on the register. He nearly uttered a whoop of delight, for it was: "Ira D. Wilson."

"Luck is coming my way like a bucking bronco on a tear!" he chuckled, striking his clinched right hand into the open palm of his left. "This is the very agent who has them yar shares, or I can't tell a Texas long-horn from a Kansas jackrabbit!"

He heard a hoarse sound close by his side, and turned to see the face of a man who was peering over his shoulder at the register.

This man was a decidedly rough-looking person, being none too well dressed, and having a face that was not altogether pleasant to look upon. His shifting, unsteady eyes were now filled with a strangely eager light. Instantly Bart was impressed with the idea that he had seen this person before, although he could not immediately remember when or where. For the moment his attention was attracted to the stranger, and when he turned to look for Ira D. Wilson, the "promoter" had disappeared.

In fact, Wilson had entered the elevator and been carried toward the upper part of the hotel, where his room was located; but Bart knew so little about big hotels that he was uncertain on this point.

"Right hyar I'll stay till I spot him again," thought the boy.

Then he noticed the rough-looking man, who was walking swiftly toward the stairs, up which he disappeared without being challenged, which was certainly an oversight on the part of those placed there to look out for such matters.

"Wonder who he is, and whar he's going up thar?" thought the boy from the West. "He an't got any business round this yar hotel, I reckon. And if I haven't seen him somewhar some time, I know a heap less than I think I do."

He was so nervous he would have paced up and down the tiled floor, but he did not desire to attract the notice of the well-dressed patrons of the hotel, many of whom were staring at him as if he were really a freak. Seeking a settee in a corner where he fancied he would not attract a great deal of attention, he sat down.

Still he was stared at; and he heard a gilded youth observe to another:

"What is that stwange cwecher over theh, deah boy? Its verwy wemarkable, don't yer know."

"Why, Algy, old fel," said the second gilded youth, "that's some low fellow who has been weading blood-and-thundaw stowies. He's got himself up in that wig to go out west in Jersey and kill Indians, don't yer see."

"Pwobably wun away fwom his mothaw."

"Of cawse. He'd be dweadfully fwightened if he met a cigaw-store Indian on a dawk evening. Haw! haw! haw!"

"Haw! haw! Have a cigawette?"

"Ya-as, thawnks. Come out wheah we can watch the deah gyrls go past."

Then they ambled away, leaving a boy behind who was regarding them with the utmost contempt.

"I suppose them yar are dudes," muttered Bart.

"If I am slow and from the West, I thank goodness I was not brought up in a city to grow into one of them critters!"

He was keenly on the alert for the reappearance of Ira Wilson, having faith the agent would show up again before long. In this he made no mistake; before much more than half an hour had passed, the man for whom he was watching sauntered up to the cigar counter and purchased a weed, for which he threw down a quarter and did not receive back any change.

The boy was seized by a fit of timidity that was quite unusual for him. He trembled violently, and hesitated about approaching the man.

"What if he has sold the shares already?" thought the lad, holding back and staring at Ira Wilson. "What if he won't talk to me about them at all? He shall! I've got the dust; and I'm going to have them yar shares before Mr. Ira Wilson sails for England! That's business, and now is my time."

Having arrived at this conclusion, he deliberately approached the agent, who had lighted his cigar and turned to walk away.

"Mister," said Bart, reaching Wilson's side, "I want to chin with you a bit, if you can spare me a few minutes of your time. I won't bother you long," he hastily added, fearing the man was about to rebuff him. "It's business I want to talk, and I'll lay a straight trail, so you can follow me without any break."

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I want to see if I can buy some mining stock of you," explained Bart, seeing it was best to come to the point at once.

"You want to buy some mining stock of me?" repeated the agent, with a puzzled air. "Then you have come to the wrong man."

CHAPTER VI.

CROOKED WORK.

“THE wrong man?”

Bart gasped the words, his bronzed face paling, and a sudden feeling of weakness running over him.

Could it be possible there was any mistake and this was not the Ira Wilson he was looking for? Was he to be baffled and defeated again by fate?

“You’re Mr. Ira Wilson, an’t you, sir?”

“That is my name.”

“And you are taking the shares of the White Horse Mine to England to dispose of over thar?”

Wilson looked somewhat surprised, scowling slightly.

“It seems to me you know a great deal about my business,” he observed, evidently displeased. “How did you find out so much?”

“I’ve lately come from Mr. Jubal Heep.”

At this, the man immediately gave him renewed attention; and Bart believed he had hit upon the right course.

“Heep? Did he send you? That makes a difference. It is not my custom to do business with boys of your age; but if Heep told you to come to me, I’ll hear what you have to say.”

“Then you have the stock?”

“Well, suppose I have, what then?” was the cautious retort.

“I want to know how much you’ll take for the whole bunch.”

"Who do you represent?"

"Bartley Stone."

"Stone? Never heard of him before. What is he?"

"He is a boy about my size and get-up."

"Oh, *you* are Bartley Stone?"

"Hit her plumb center that time, mister. I'm Bartley Stone; and I want to buy that thar stock."

Wilson stepped back, tipped his head to one side, the cigar held in the highest corner in his mouth, and surveyed the lad from head to feet, not speaking for some seconds. Bart stood up squarely and looked the man in the face, waiting to hear what he might have to say.

"You're the genuine article," the agent finally nodded. "No fake about you. What part of the West are you from?"

"Kansas."

"Great State. Been through Kansas. What are you doing in the East?"

"Oh, kind of whooping around to see the country. Thought I might pick up a good investment."

"And that's why you're looking after the White Horse Mine, eh?"

"Wa-al, I heard as how the stock may be roped mighty cheap."

"Oh, I don't know about that," and Wilson shook his head gravely. "Certain English capitalists are hot to get hold of it. That's why I'm taking it over. The mine has been lying idle for some time, on account of legal difficulties and complications; but it is to be opened up and worked on a large scale once more within a few months."

It was with difficulty Bart succeeded in keeping a smile of amusement from his face. Indeed, there was a queer twinkle in his eyes; but he spoke with the utmost gravity.

"This scarcely holds water with what Mr. Heep said about it. He told me the stock was of very small value, having no quoted price; and I kind of reckoned he was giving it to me fair and square."

A look of disgust flashed across the agent's face and disappeared in a second.

"It is evident Heep was stringing you," he smiled. "I do not suppose he considered you a possible customer, and so he gave such false ideas. You do not look as if you are stuffed with money."

"Can't always judge a bird by her feathers, mister. Maybe I'll pan out a heap sight better'n I look."

"Have you cash?"

"Some."

"How much?"

"Wa-al, maybe I have enough to buy that thar stock—maybe not. I can tell a great deal better after I find out how much she'll cost at rock-bottom figures."

Bart was cautious, and the agent did not know exactly how to take him. There was a certain independent, straightforward air about the lad that seemed to indicate he meant business, and, yet on account of his years, the man distrusted him.

Wilson seemed to hesitate, all the while trying to size up the boy. Pretty soon, he said:

"If I make a bargain with you, how do I know your father will not come forward and repudiate it?"

"My father is dead."

"Ah! Where did you get your money?"

"It was given me for investment by my mother."

"Your mother? Is she well fixed?"

"I have all the money we possess right in my belt," touching the leather band that ran around his waist.

"Then let me tell you something," Wilson suddenly returned; "you had better keep it right there. I have

stuck a great many suckers in my day, although I'm not so very old; but I'll hanged if I ever beat a boy. If you had plenty of the filthy, I might think it would teach you a good lesson to paste the White Horse stuff onto you. As it is, I confess Jubal Heep told you the truth—the stock is not worth a tinker's hoot. You don't want it."

Then Bart was obliged to once more tell the story about thinking it possible he could make something working over the old vein.

"Don't take any chances on that, young man," advised the agent. "The only way to make a mine of that sort pay is to work it on a large scale, and, as you can't do that, you would be a dead loser."

"Still, I will take my chances, if I can get hold of it cheap enough," persisted the boy from the West. "Will you set a price for the whole bunch, please?"

Ira Wilson puffed at the fragrant cigar, a far-away look in his keen blue eyes. All at once, he seemed to come back to the situation, saying:

"If you get stuck on this, don't blame me, young man. Of course I am bound to sell, if you have the rhino and persist in buying."

"Don't you worry about me. I'm able to take care of myself pretty well. Set the price."

"Well, I'll take ten thousand dollars for the whole lot."

Ten thousand dollars! That was at least twice as much as Bart had in his possession.

"I'll give you one thousand, mister," coolly said the lad; "and 'cording to your own tell that yar's morne'n she's worth a heap sight."

"I can get more than that out of it by taking the shares over the pond; and I'll save you from wishing you hadn't done so."

"Say, call it two thousand. That's business."

Right there Bart stuck for a long time; but Wilson finally said he would take twenty-five hundred dollars. Barely had he uttered the words when Bart closed with him, thrusting a fifty dollar bill into his hand.

"This binds the bargain, mister!" laughed the boy. "Them thar shares are mine. I'll take them right away."

The agent was a bit staggered; but he finally laughed and said:

"All right. Come up to my room, and we'll finish up the business."

Up by the elevator they went. When Wilson reached the door of his room, he uttered an exclamation of surprise; for he found it standing slightly open.

"I'm dead sure I locked it when I went out!" he cried, as he hastily entered. "I hope everything's all right. Ah! here's my grip!" catching sight of it as it sat on a small table near a window. "The stock is in that."

He advanced to the grip and put out his hand to open it.

A sudden, startled cry came from his lips, and he leaped forward, catching it up.

"Cut—slashed! Crooked work! Look here!"

He turned it so Bart saw a keen knife had ripped a long slit in one side of the grip.

A moment later, Wilson had torn it open and was hastily examining its contents. After a few seconds, he ejaculated:

"The stock of the White Horse Mine is gone! The certificates have been stolen!"

"Are you sure?" gasped Bart, who could scarcely believe fate had struck him such a cruel blow.

"Sure! There's no mistake! They were taken

while I talked with you. The thief cannot be far away! Out—after him!”

In his excitement, he dashed from the room, the boy at his heels. The car of the elevator happened to be at hand, and they caught it going down.

When the main floor was reached, Wilson rushed toward the desk to give notice what had happened. Bart, however, saw a man who was hurrying toward the front doors—the rough-looking man who had peered over his shoulder at the register. Instantly the suspicion of the boy was aroused, and he bounded forward, pointing at the stranger, as he cried in ringing tones:

“Stop that man! Search him! He is a thief!”

The fellow cast a hasty look over his shoulder, and then rushed out to the street. Bart was close after him, and he knew it.

“I won’t go back to do time now!” grated the fugitive, as he ran across the wide sidewalk.

An instant later he had leaped to the seat of a two-horse cab, snatching the reins and whip from the fingers of the astounded driver, who was pitched headlong to the street.

Swish! crack! the whip cut through the air and scored on the backs of the horses, causing the animals to leap forward madly.

Bart was a moment too late to catch onto the cab; but he did not propose to let the man get away. A black boy was holding a saddled horse that was waiting for its master to take a dash through the Park, and the pursuing lad saw the animal was just what he needed.

The next instant the rein was jerked from the black boy’s hand, and the horse went tearing down Broadway and into Twenty-third Street, Bartley Stone in the saddle.

Yelling for people to clear the way, the fugitive on the cab stood up straight and slashed the horses with the whip; but the animals, encumbered as they were, could not distance the one in pursuit. Bart quickly reached the cab, passed it, and drew alongside the galloping horses, for all of the lashing the horses were receiving.

The boy from the West leaned from the saddle to grasp the bit of the nearest animal, crying:

“Whoa up, thar! Stand and deliver them yar shares! They belong to me, and I’m hyar to take them!”

CHAPTER VII.

WALTER'S DOWNFALL.

AN angry snarl broke from the lips of the fugitive thief, as he saw Bart Stone grasp the bit of the horse nearest him.

"No, you don't!"

As he ground the words through his teeth, his whip cut the air again, scoring on the horse's back. At the same moment he gave a strong surge on one rein, literally hurling both animals to the right and against the creature bestrode by the boy.

It was a desperate move, and, for a moment, the result that followed appeared like a tragedy.

Bart's horse was sent to the ground in a heap with astounding suddenness, and it seemed the boy from the West must be hurled to the stones and instantly killed or maimed for life. Indeed, had he been an ordinary lad who had learned to ride a horse at riding school, no matter how well he had acquired the art, a serious catastrophe could not have been averted.

Bart Stone, however, was not an ordinary lad, and he had not learned to ride at a school. He was from the plains and mountains; and the cowboys of the Kansas ranches had taught him to ride at highest speed across the prairies, where there are gopher holes and the burrows of prairie dogs, into which the leg of a galloping horse may drop at any moment.

One of the things he had learned was to be ready for

a horse to fall beneath him at any time. Indeed, in his spare moments, he had trained his own horse to drop at a signal, allowing him to shoot over its head.

No one can tell when knowledge and skill thus acquired may prove of inestimable value to him; and it was certainly worth a great deal to Bart just then, for it enabled him to leap over the head of the falling horse and strike lightly on his feet, unharmed.

The cab thundered on, and, as the dismounted boy had no time to discover if the horse were injured, he pursued it on foot, shouting to a policeman down the street to stop the thief.

The officer ran out and made a feeble attempt to check the horses; but he thought too much of his life to get in the way of actual danger.

A large crowd of people were now rushing along the street in pursuit of the flying cab, with Bart in the van, although the boy had begun to fear the desperate thief would make his escape.

As Third Avenue was reached, for all of the skill of the driver on the cab, a collision occurred. A heavy truck was in the way, and a forward wheel of the cab locked with a rear wheel of the truck.

Then followed a crash and a smash-up of the most startling nature, for the truck, cab, horses and men seemed all mixed together in a struggling mass.

Policemen rushed forward and grasped the horses, and a great crowd seemed to spring from the ground and surround the spot in a moment.

Bart Stone came rushing up and literally tore his way through the throng.

"Whar is he?" was his cry. "Have you roped him?"

"It's all right," assured a man. "They have the horses safe."

"Hang the hawses!" shouted the boy. "Whar's the man as was driving them?"

No one seemed to know, and Bart looked in vain for the slippery thief. The fellow had apparently escaped injury and vanished in the crowd when it gathered around.

The boy from the West was almost distracted.

"I'll give a hundred dollars spot cash to know whar the varmint has gone!" he cried wildly.

"What's the matter with yer?" coarsely asked one of the policemen. "Who was the bloke, anyway?"

"A thief!" replied Bart fiercely. "A miserable, sneaking thief!"

"What'd he stole?"

"Stocks—shares—certificates—the White Hawse Mine! He did it in the Fifth Avenue Hotel! That's how he happened to be drivin' like a whole bunch of steers on the stampede. I was after him."

Then it came about that a dozen people in the crowd suddenly declared, that they had seen the man go in as many different directions, and Bart realized there was no possible way to determine which course the rascal had chosen.

This was another terrible rebuff, seeming all the heavier because he had so nearly placed his hands on the coveted shares. He ground his teeth, and his face wore a stern, hard look that told how thoroughly aroused was his nature.

"The mine rightfully belongs to my mother, and I'll have them yar shares yet!" was his thought. "I've bought them fair and squar'; and Wilson can't back out, for he accepted fifty dollars to bind the bargain."

Neither of the cab horses had been seriously injured, and Bart explained to the policemen how they were taken from in front of the Fifth Avenue Hotel, after

which he hurried back to learn what had become of the animal he had appropriated.

When he reached the spot where the horse had fallen, he found it was gone, and a boy told him it had been taken to the hotel. Bart felt some relief at this, for it could not be the creature had broken a leg or received any serious damage.

Walking forward at a swinging gait, he crossed the street, and was soon on the corner, where he could see the animal he had taken once more standing before the hotel, held by the same black boy, while several persons were looking it over, as if searching for injuries.

Bart did not hesitate about advancing, although a premonition of trouble to follow suddenly came over him.

One of the persons looking at the horse was dressed in a riding suit, being apparently the owner of the animal. He was talking to a well-dressed youth, at sight of whom the boy from the West set his teeth and scowled slightly, for he recognized Walter St. Omer Stark.

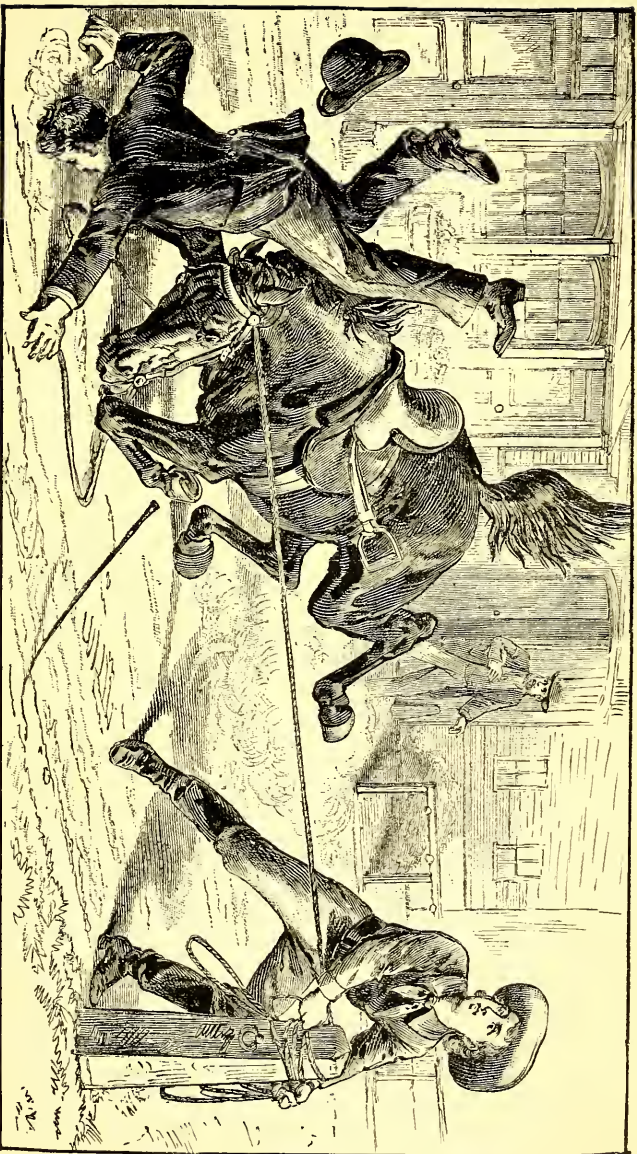
"If you are the owner of that hawse, mister, I have to ask your pardon for hooking to the critter so sudden without so much as asking leave," said Bart, as he reached the spot.

The young man in the riding suit and Walter Stark suddenly straightened up and whirled to face the speaker.

"Dat's de feller!" cried the black boy at the horse's head; "dat's de feller dat took de hoss, sah!"

"And he's the very chap I said he was when I heard the description of him!" broke from Walter Stark's lips. "This is not the first time he has taken a horse without leave!"

Bart flushed a bit, but paid no attention to the millionaire's son.



"Walter Stark was sent flying through the air."

(See page 16)

"I simply borrowed your hawse, sir, to pursue a thief," he calmly explained. "There was no time to ask for it; and I reckoned the emergency of the case pardoned the act."

"Then you reckoned wrong," haughtily returned the young man. "Such an offense is not pardonable. If you knew how to ride a horse, it would be somewhat different, but——"

"Stop right thar! I can stand a heap, but I can't stand to have a tenderfoot tell me I don't know how to ride! That just naturally riles me all up! I'm willing to pay——"

"Bah!" scornfully cut in Walter Stark. "He knows he's in a bad box, and now he's trying to sneak out of it. Pay! Why, it's a pure case of theft! If you let him off, you're a chump, Steinway!"

Bart's lips were pressed together once more, but still he did not look at young Stark, pretending he had not heard a word uttered by the vindictive youth.

Steinway, as Walter had called the young man in the riding suit, seemed spurred on by the words of the millionaire's son; for he took a threatening step toward Bart, who stood quietly by, showing no alarm.

"I believe Walt is right; I believe you really did mean to swipe the horse!" he exclaimed.

"Of course he did!" insisted Walter. "He stole one belonging to Steve Jones of Somerset Falls yesterday, and the sheriff is looking for him now. There is a warrant out for his arrest."

"Do you deny this?" asked Steinway.

"I deny stealing any man's hawse, sir. I paid for the use of the animal."

"That won't go down! He does not deny he took the animal without leave—he can't deny it without lying! Better give him a lesson, Ned."

"Shall I have him arrested?"

"Sure."

"There's no policeman handy."

"I'll hold him while you get one."

Walter Stark's hand fell on Bart's shoulder, and then the boy from the West looked at him squarely. Quite a number of spectators were watching all that passed.

"I an't done anything to be arrested for, and I don't reckon I'll run; so you can take that thar paw off my shoulder."

"Not much! I don't propose to give you a chance to sneak, Mr. Cow-puncher."

A dangerous light flashed in Bart's eyes, which usually wore a rather sleepy look; and his voice had a hard sound, as he said, in a low tone:

"Take it off, or——"

"Or what?" sneered Walter.

For reply, with one swift motion, the boy from the West struck the hand from his shoulder.

Uttering a cry of rage, the champion boxer of the Trojan Club delivered a sweeping blow straight at Bart Stone's face, expecting to knock the young cowboy down with ease.

Never in his life was he more disappointed; for the boy from the West easily ducked and avoided the blow, taking a step to the left and swinging his right foot round with an oblique movement that caught the shins of the millionaire's son, and sent him sprawling on the sidewalk of the Fifth Avenue Hotel.

CHAPTER VIII.

BART STANDS BY THE BARGAIN.

It had happened so swiftly that most of the spectators were unable to tell how it came about.

Walter Stark, rather dazed, gathered himself up in time to see a young lady and an elder companion, who were passing at that moment, gazing, at him in apparent amazement and dismay.

"Great heavens!" he faintly gasped. "Miss Van Worth!"

Shamed and abashed, he turned his eyes away and pretended he did not see the young lady, who passed on and was lost in the throng of pedestrians.

Walter scrambled to his feet, his face ghastly with fury, quivering all over in his excitement. He would have flung himself at Bart once more, but Steinway caught him by the arm, exclaiming:

"Let up, Walt—let up! Think what you are doing—fighting with a common creature of that sort! You are making a public show of yourself!"

"Let me go!" panted the millionaire's son. "Let me get at him! I'll fix him!"

Steinway held fast, restraining the enraged lad by main force, as he again urged him to think what a spectacle he was making of himself.

"Don't be a fool, Walt!" he cautioned sharply. "You will disgrace yourself."

"I am disgraced already! Miss Van Worth saw me! Let go, I say!"

He was fairly foaming in his fierce desire to reach the boy who had overthrown him thus easily.

Bart Stone did not seem in the least alarmed; for he stood calmly regarding the furious son of the man he believed had swindled his mother out of her rights, his hands resting on his hips and his attitude apparently one of careless indifference.

Quite a crowd had now collected about the spot, and, after some moments, Steinway succeeded in convincing Walter how foolishly he was acting.

"What if you whipped him," whispered the young man in the riding suit. "There'd be no honor in it. He's one of the common herd. Do have a little sense!"

"But it's tough to have a trick like that worked on you by such a creature! Think of me tripped down in this public place! And seen by Miss Van Worth! What can I tell her when we meet? It's horrible!"

He felt his humiliation so keenly that his chin quivered, and he ground his white teeth together.

"Move on here—move on!" called a commanding voice. "What's all this mean, anyway?"

"An officer!" exclaimed Walter and Steinway together.

"This way, sir," called the young man, motioning to the policeman. "You are wanted."

"What is it?" asked the man in blue, as the spectators scattered before him and he came forward. "What do you want of me?"

"I want you to arrest that young ruffian;" and Steinway pointed straight at Bart, who did not flinch or appear frightened in the smallest degree.

"This one," questioned the officer, dropping his hand on Bart's shoulder. "What's he done?"

"Assaulted me," replied Walter Stark swiftly. "He struck me!"

"That's crooked, and you know it," broke in the boy from the West, speaking without any great show of excitement. "You struck at me, and I simply knocked your hoofs from under you. I'll leave it to any of these people if that thar an't so."

"It is true," affirmed several voices.

The policeman looked a trifle surprised, but, seeing Walter was well dressed and apparently of the better class, he asked:

"Do you want to make a charge of assault?"

"No," cut in Steinway abruptly; "but we want him arrested, just the same. I'll bring a charge against him."

"What charge?"

"Theft. He attempted to steal my horse there only a short time ago. Take him to the station house, officer, and I will appear against him."

Bart had opened his mouth to explain when he caught sight of a man who was pressing his way toward the center of the crowd, and an exclamation of satisfaction escaped his lips as he recognized Ira D. Wilson, the agent and promoter.

Wilson hurried to Bart's side, panting as if he had recently exerted himself severely.

"How did he get away! Where did he go?" questioned the agent, in perturbation. "You did not catch him?"

Bart knew he was speaking of the thief, and he promptly replied:

"I did my best, Mr. Wilson; but he got away with the stock."

"Wilson! Stock!" almost shouted Walter Stark, catching hold of the promoter. "Man, I thought you were on your way to Europe!"

"Got left," laconically explained Wilson.

"What is it about stock?" questioned the millionaire's son, a suspicion of truth flashing through his mind. "I hope you haven't——"

"Sold the old White Horse shares to this boy for twenty-five hundred dollars. Great bargain. But a thief ripped open my grip and got away with the certificates. Now, as I cannot deliver, I suppose I'll have to give up the fifty he paid to bind the trade."

Walter Stark literally gasped for breath.

"Sold them!" he panted. "Why, the vein has been re-located! That's what brought this boy here to buy it! Stolen! Well, by Jupiter! you have made a pretty mess, Wilson!"

The promoter looked thunderstruck, being unable to utter a word for some seconds. Finally, he faintly gasped:

"Impossible!"

"It's true," asserted Walter savagely. "The shares were intrusted in your care, and you are responsible for them. If they are lost, you'll find yourself in a pretty box."

"Well, they are lost for the present," confessed the agent, nervously twisting his red mustache; "but the police may be able to recover them."

Then he produced a roll of banknotes, from which he extracted a fifty-dollar bill, turning and tendering it to Bart, observing:

"As I cannot deliver the stock, I'll have to give you back your deposit."

The boy from the West drew back.

"No, mister," he said; "a trade's a trade, and I don't back out none whatever. Keep the fifty, and I'll pay the rest and take the shares when they're found. I reckon that thar's about the right way to do this business."

"Make him take it back—make him take it!" cried Walter excitedly. "He can't have those shares at any price!"

"I kinder 'low you're too late to head off this yar trade," smiled Bart, with no small amount of satisfaction. "It's made now, and thar can't be no going back on it."

"No writings have been made, and the stock is not delivered yet. It's no bargain at all. Give him the fifty, Mr. Wilson."

The young cowboy put his hands behind him, a determined look on his somewhat stolid face.

"I'm a little slow," he drawled; "but I an't the biggest fool this side of Oklahoma—not by two yards," his eyes measuring the distance between himself and the millionaire's son.

At this Walter flushed hotly and clinched his hands, taking a slight step forward, to be checked by Steinway.

"You *must* accept the money," insisted Wilson.

"Wa-al, I won't; and that yar's the whole bigness of it," was the retort. "I call on these yar people to take notice this man has acknowledged the bargain fair and squar'. I propose to make him stand by it."

"That's right! That's right!" came from several quarters.

Seeing sympathy was with the boy, Wilson suddenly abandoned the attempt to force the money on him, saying:

"We'll settle this matter some other time."

"In the meantime," put in Ned Steinway, "I charge this young scoundrel with attempting to steal my horse, and ask that he be arrested. I will appear against him. Here, officer, is my name and address," handing the policeman an engraved card.

"All right, sir," said the officer, respectfully as soon as he had glanced at the card. "I'll take him in. Come along, young feller."

Bart was marched away to the station house followed by quite a throng of people, who looked curiously at the strangely dressed boy in the policeman's charge.

CHAPTER IX.

UNMASKING THE THIEF.

IT must be confessed Bart felt rather downcast when he found himself locked up in a wretched room in company with a "common drunk." He wondered what the result of it all would be, and he felt his situation might be serious; for the enemies pitted against him were both wealthy and influential, as well as unprincipled.

Many times he had listened to his mother's story about how Cyrus Stark had cheated her out of her rights; and he had learned to hate the man who could be guilty of deliberately wronging a woman like his beloved mother.

He did not doubt that Stark was an abject scoundrel; and he had come East convinced it was his duty to get the best of the man in some manner, and regain possession of the mine that Mrs. Stone had been swindled out of at her husband's death.

Although Bart was rather unsophisticated and hardly fitted to deal with shrewd business men, he was getting his eyes open with a rapidity that startled himself. He saw it was to be a bitter fight; and it was his resolve to never give up while there was the shadow of hope.

He wondered if Steinway and Walter would be able to do anything with him for appropriating the horse to his use in pursuing the thief; and it is certain he felt

rather "shaky" when he considered his position and their apparent power.

He lay down and tried to sleep; but the snoring of the intoxicated man and the earnest attention of certain lively little insects in the bunk made it impossible for him to rest.

At length he was brought into court and found himself before the judge. No one appeared against him, and his honor directed that he be taken to a cell and kept until the following day.

Bart spent a most wretched night, and he was glad when morning came once more.

Before nine o'clock the boy was surprised to receive a call from the lawyer, Jubal Heep.

"Well, young man," said the crafty attorney, rubbing his nose with his forefinger; "you seem to be in trouble."

"Oh, I don't know," returned the boy, as coolly as possible. "I managed to get a free night's lodging."

"It is possible you are not aware how serious the situation really is," ventured Mr. Heep, in his most insinuating way. "You are liable to receive a long sentence."

"For what?"

"Well," mysteriously answered the lawyer, "I understand a very grave charge is to be brought against you."

"Wa-al, if it an't a secret, I wouldn't mind knowing just about how the land lays, mister."

"The shares were stolen from Mr. Wilson while you were in the hotel."

"I reckon that's right."

"It is said you are an accomplice of the thief."

"Wh-a-a-at?"

Bart was so astonished he could no more than gasp

forth the word; but he almost immediately began to laugh heartily.

"You are pretty sure to discover it is no laughing matter, young man," sharply assured Jubal Heep. "It looks rather black for you."

"Wa-al, of all the things I ever heard, that yar just about lays over the lot!"

"You will find it is no fooling affair, boy. If the charge is proved against you, you will get five years at least. I am a lawyer, and I know what I'm talking about."

Bart was suddenly serious once more, as he said:

"Look hyar, Mr. Heep, how is a feller to steal what rightfully belongs to him? Tell me that."

"What do you mean?"

"That them thar shares are mine by right of bargain, fair and squar'. I couldn't steal them."

"Oh, that won't hold water, my lad! You have simply paid fifty dollars, and the charge is that you plotted to have the stock stolen, so you could escape paying the balance. You played your part very well, Wilson says; but he is certain you stood in with the thief."

A look of anger settled on the face of the boy from the West, and his sleepy eyes suddenly flashed.

"So that yar Wilson stands up for the rest of the crooked gang!" he cried. "I didn't expect anything better of a man as makes swindling his profession! But I an't beat on this trial, yet, by a heap sight; and they're going to have a right smart tussle to get ahead of me. I'll fight right plum through to the grand round-up!"

"You are very foolish," assured Heep, scowling and rubbing his beak excitedly. "You'll get the worst of it, as sure as fate. You are nothing but a boy, and that

without friends in this city, while the ones you are trying to beat are rich and powerful.

"Now, look here," he went on. "I can get you out of this scrape, if you'll let me. Just do what I want you to, and I'll guarantee you will not be prosecuted."

"Wa-al, what you want me to do?"

"Accept this money and sign this paper."

Heep held out a bill and a written document; but Bart accepted only the latter.

Hastily the boy ran his eyes over the paper, and he quickly discovered it was a document stating he gave over all claim to the stock of the White Horse Mine.

"What's your answer?" eagerly asked Heep.

"This!"

With that one word, the undaunted boy tore the paper in two pieces, which he crumpled and cast the scheming lawyer's feet.

"All right!" shouted Heep, as he picked up the pieces and retreated from the cell. "You'll be sorry for this! You're only a boy, and the trade won't stand, anyway! Perhaps you think you're smart; but you'll change your mind before you are a week older!"

When he was once more left to himself, Bart's anger cooled, and he finally smiled in a grim way over the rage of the defeated lawyer. Within an hour he was again taken to the courtroom, and, when his case was called, to his astonishment, the judge promptly dismissed the whole matter, saying:

"Young man, you may consider yourself very fortunate to have a wealthy and influential friend to get you out of such a bad scrape. You may go."

Bart turned from the bench, vaguely wondering who his mysterious friend could be, but inclined to believe this was simply an excuse of his enemies for not pressing the charge against him.

As he left the building, he noticed a black-whiskered man who started to follow him—or seemed to do so.

Seeing he was observed, this man pretended to be highly interested in reading a theatrical poster on a dead wall; and Bart walked swiftly on.

The boy had resolved to proceed directly to the Fifth Avenue Hotel and have a talk with Ira Wilson, so he took the first car bound in the right direction. As he sat down within the car, he was surprised to see the black-whiskered man run from the curbing and swing on the rear platform.

“Wonder if he’s trailing [me?” thought Bart. “Blamed if it don’t look that yar way! Maybe they’ve put a detective after me.”

Instead of alarming him, the thought made him angry; and he fell to watching the man. It did not take him long to decide the black beard was false.

When he left the car and hurried toward the Fifth Avenue Hotel, he was fully aware the man still followed him.

Reaching the hotel, he boldly entered, approached the clerk’s desk and asked for Mr. Ira Wilson.

“He is not here,” haughtily asserted the clerk.

“Not here?” gasped Bart.

“No. He left last night.”

“Where—where did he go?”

“I don’t know. Please step aside for that gentleman.”

The boy left the desk and slowly walked out of the hotel, scarcely knowing which way to turn. He wandered along from street to street, hardly heeding whither his footsteps were taking him.

All at once, he remembered the black-whiskered man and looked back.

The strange individual was still following him,

"I will just know what that yar face under them whiskers looks like," muttered Bart, as he swiftly turned a corner and then halted to await the man's appearance.

He had to wait but a few seconds, and when the owner of the black beard came suddenly around the corner, the boy stepped forward and confronted him, crying:

"Look hyar, what for are you follering me round?"

"Following you?" repeated the stranger, with apparent astonishment. "You have made a mistake, young fellow!"

"Have I? Wa-al, I wonder what you carry behind them thar whiskers?" With a swift snatch, he tore the false beard from the man's face.

A cry of mingled astonishment and triumph broke from his lips; for the features revealed were those of the thief who had stolen the coveted shares of the White Horse Mine!

CHAPTER X.

A STARTLING ASSERTION.

"THE thief!"

This exclamation broke from Bart's lips, as he clutched excitedly at the man's arm.

"Sh!" cautioned the individual who had been thus unmasked. "You'll attract attention, kid!"

"Wa-al, that thar's just what I want to do," hotly returned the boy from the West. "I want to attract the attention of a policeman."

"Don't make a fool of yourself!" snapped the man. "I'm your friend."

A look of scorn swept across the lad's face, and he quickly returned:

"Wa-al, not to any great extent! I don't make pards of such galoots as you."

"Wait," urged the stranger—"wait till you hear what I have to say."

"I don't reckon you can say anything that'll make you any less a thief and a sneak. I kind of 'low you want to talk so you can find a chance to give me the slip. No, Mr. Thief, that thar game won't work."

"But you are dead wrong, boy. What do you s'pose I was following you around for if I didn't want a chance to talk with you?"

"I don't know."

"I was waiting until I found a good chance to speak to you without attracting the notice of anybody. There's some blokes staring at us now on the opposite

side of the street. Come into this hash shop, where we can sit down and talk across a table. You can keep watch of me and grab me, if I try to sneak."

Bart hesitated.

"What if I was seen having a powwow with you, stranger?" he said. "They say now that I am a sidepard of yours on this crooked piece of business; and they'd have what would look like proof if we were seen together. No, I——"

"I can tell you some things that will knock you silly," cut in the man. "I know a few points about the White Horse Mine, your father and Mr. Cyrus Stark."

The boy felt a strong desire to hear what this strange thief had to say; and he finally yielded to it, following the man into the restaurant, where they sat down at a little side table in a corner.

Bart was hungry; but the excitement of having found the thief had driven all thoughts of eating from his mind. However, when the man coolly gave an order from the bill of fare, the lad decided to have something, and he called for a roast, with vegetables.

All the while, he was studying the face of the thief, who seemed quite unconcerned and at his ease. More than ever did the man's features seem familiar to Bart; but if he had ever seen the fellow before, he could not remember just when and where. The stranger took note of this scrutiny, and he finally asked:

"Can you place me now?"

Bart shook his head.

"Not quite," he confessed; "and yet I'm pretty sure this yere an't the first time we've met."

"You're right, young feller. I'm Buck Prindle."

But that name did not bring any light to Bart's mind, as the blank look on his face plainly indicated.

The food they had ordered was now placed before them, and Mr. Prindle began eating at once, appearing very hungry. The aroma of the roast and coffee reawakened the boy's appetite, and he was not long in following the man's example, although his mind was busy with a jumbled mass of ideas, which, nevertheless, did not cause him to relax in the least his vigilant watch over the thief.

All at once, when he had partially satisfied his hunger, he was struck forcibly by the singularity of the situation and the thought that he was eating at a table with a man whom he knew to be crooked.

"Say," and he put down his fork, looking the other square in the face, "I reckon I'm daft to be doing a thing like this yere. I came in hyar to listen to what you've got to say, and if that yar's anything, spit her out mighty smart. I'm going to tell a waiter to call an officer right away soon."

Mr. Prindle deliberately took a drink of coffee, and then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, after which he said:

"I s'pose you want to know why I swiped them certificates?"

"Wa-al, I wouldn't object."

"I used to work for your father in the old mine."

"Then that explains why you looked natural to me. I must have seen you some time in them thar days."

Prindle nodded.

"Dead sure, kid. I've seen you lots of times, though you have changed amazingly in the last four years."

"But this don't explain why you corraled the stock."

"I'm just on this way from Colorader. I went through the mine two weeks ago."

Bart caught his breath sharply, while Buck Prindle grinned in a knowing way.

"What did you find thar?" slowly questioned the boy.

"I found where some bloke had put in a blast and blowed down a few tons of rock."

"Wa-al?"

"I was brought up in a city," Prindle went on; "but the time I spent in the old mine when your father an' Stark were workin' her, fixed me so I can tell pay ore when I see it. I found that blast had ripped its way right slap into a rich lead. My eyes told me that; but I scooped some of the stuff an' took it to Denver to be assayed. As soon as I heard the result, I swore I'd have the White Horse Mine by hook or crook."

Bart pressed his lips together, and watched the man closely, but said nothing, while the miner continued:

"I didn't have more than enough wealth to buy a second-class ticket to New York; but I came right along, countin' on scoopin' that stock, all the time. Mebbe you wonder how I expected to do the trick. Well, I knew it would not be very hard if old Stark still owned the shares, for I have a double and twisted grip on the sinner, though he didn't expect to be troubled by me for the next eight or nine years, as he supposes I'm servin' a ten years' sentence in Joliet."

Prindle's face began to work with passion, and there was a fierce look in his eyes, as he ground through his teeth:

"The sneakin' traitor! Since I was pardoned out, three months ago, I've found it was his money that procured my conviction for breakin' an' enterin' in Chicago. And all the time he was pretendin' to be my friend! When I was sure of this, I swore I'd get square with the old villain some way; and I'll do it! I'll make him beg before I'm done, or my name an't Buck Prindle!

When I got to New York, I discovered he was out of town somewhere, and then, by diggin' around, I found out Jubal Heep was his lawyer, and had charge of the shares I wanted. I went to Heep's office. The door was open, an' I stepped in. Heep was in the back room with Mr. Ira Wilson, and they didn't hear me come in. I laid low and heard the job put up to stick the supposed-to-be worthless stock on the Britishers. Then I slipped out an' follered Wilson when he showed up, waiting for my chance to swipe his grip. I knew if I could get hold of the stock I had a way to make Stark relinquish his claim on it to me, but, at the same time, I was just as sure Wilson would not turn it over if I struck him for it.

"Well, I just followed that agent everywhere he went, and I was in the smash-up over in Jersey. Then I shadowed him to the Fifth Avenue Hotel and saw the number of his room on the register. That was when I noticed you the first time, an' you looked natural, though I couldn't just place ye then. I sneaked up the stairs, and waited till Wilson left the room. Havin' a rig of skeleton keys, it didn't take me long to open the door after he went down; but I barely got out, as you an' he came up together. You can wager your wealth I lost no time in gettin' downstairs; but I was stopped and questioned about my business there. That gave you time to get down and see me goin' out. You know the rest."

Bart had listened attentively, and he now observed:

"Wa-al, Mr. Prindle, you may have told the squar' truth; but I kinder think you took a right crooked way of getting hold of the shares. You're a thief, and you can't get around that none whatever."

"I'm simply gettin' square with old Cy Stark for the dirty deal he played me."

"Them thar shares don't belong to Mr. Stark any more. I've bought them for twenty-five hundred dollars, and paid down fifty to bind the bargain; so you were really stealing from me."

"I'm glad to hear this; an' I've got a proposal to make."

"What is it?"

"That you pay the rest of the money an' agree to take your chances on recoverin' the stock."

"What then?"

"You'll get it all right, if you'll agree to give me half interest in the mine. That's a fair offer, an' you can't refuse."

"Wa-al, I *do* refuse, all the same; for I don't propose to go into partnership with ary galoot of your caliber, Mr. Prindle;" and the boy arose to his feet.

"What are you goin' to do?" asked the man.

"I'm going to see an officer is called in, and direct him to arrest you instanter," was the prompt reply.

Prindle was really alarmed, for he realized the boy from the West would not be easily turned from his determination; and, though he claimed to have a hold on Stark, he had no desire to give the man another opportunity to send him to jail by means of his money and influence.

"Say!" he gasped; "hold on a minute!"

Bart was looking around to catch the eye of a waiter, and the ex-convict hastily continued:

"You want ter get a grip on old Stark yourself; an' I can tell you something that'll fix you so you'll have him foul—something about your father."

He saw he had struck the right note, for Bart hesitated and turned toward him asking:

"What do you know about Mr. Stark's dealings with my father?"

"Well, I know more'n you dream—I even know he beat your mother out of her rights after your dad croaked."

"You say you know this; but how do you know so much?"

"Set down," urged the man. "I'll tell you some things that'll make your hair stand. I was in the mine when your father was killed; an' I know just how it happened."

There seemed to be a hidden meaning in Prindle's words, and Bart Stone felt his heart give a sudden leap. Now he was eager to have the miner continue, for it seemed possible the fellow really could reveal something of importance.

The man saw that he had aroused the lad's curiosity, and he added:

"I an' one other was the last ones to see your father alive, kid. Do you know just how he came to his death?"

"I know he was killed by a premature blast. It was a terrible accident!"

"Accident!" returned Buck Prindle, scornfully "Let me tell you your father wasn't killed by accident. young feller!"

CHAPTER XI.

TRYING TO GET AT THE TRUTH.

THE words struck Bart Stone like a blow in the face; and he turned ghastly pale, staring in speechless horror at the man who had given them utterance.

"Not killed by accident?" he finally managed to gasp.

"That's what I said," nodded the ex-convict.

The usually slow and deliberate lad leaned across the table, and, like a flash, his fingers closed with a grip of iron on Prindle's wrist.

"Man," he panted, shaking with emotion; "do you understand the full meaning of them thar words?"

The miner looked startled by the strange manner of the boy, shrinking back. Bart's eyes were filled with a wild light, and the clasp of his fingers revealed to Prindle that the boy was the possessor of remarkable strength.

"Do you know what you have said?" came hoarsely from the lad's lips.

"Of course I do," mumbled the one questioned.

"What did you mean?"

"Just that."

"My father did not commit suicide?"

"Of course he didn't."

"Then thar's only one meaning to be put to what you just said."

Prindle was silent, a look of fear stealing over his face; for he realized what was coming.

"If my father was not killed by accident and did not commit suicide," the boy went on, his voice now sounding hard and restrained; "there is but one explanation of his death. *He was murdered!*"

It was the ex-convict's turn to grow pale, for the word smote on his ear with the staggering force of a fearful accusation. The man began to feel that, in his eagerness to keep the boy from turning him over to the police, he had allowed his lips to utter too much.

Not for a moment did the lad's eyes leave the face of Buck Prindle; and they seemed to pierce the man through and through with their burning intensity. The miner began to understand the resistless force of this boy's nature and will-power, seeing he had given him a clew that would be followed up until the whole black truth became known.

"Is that yar right?" demanded Bart fiercely. "Speak up and tell what you know!"

"Seems to me you're crowdin' the mourners," rather feebly returned Prindle.

"Speak!" commanded the lad. "You can't turn tail and go back over the trail now. It's too late."

"I don't want to go back on anything; but I didn't say your dad was—was murdered."

"You might as well; your words meant that. Look hyar, I'm bound to have the whole of it now, Mr. Prindle; and you may as well tell me just what you know. If you can prove what you've said——"

"What?"

"Wa-al, I'll see that you are paid for it as you ought to be. That's squar'."

It might be square; but the words struck Buck with a meaning the boy had not intended they should convey. If he received what he merited, even a full confession might not clear him from the grasp of the law.

The lad saw Prindle was hesitating, and he began to fear the man would go back on what he had already said; yet he knew not just how to wring a further confession from his lips. His hand went around to his hip with an unconscious movement; but the holsters were empty, so his fingers did not close on the butt of a ready weapon.

The miner saw the movement, and it aroused his resentment.

"Would you pull a gun on me?" he asked hotly. "I can be led, but hanged if I'll be drove!"

"Take your choice—talk, or I call the police!" resolutely returned the boy from the West. "It's plain you know something I have a right to hear."

"I'm glad you think so, kid," half sneered Prindle, seeking to regain his composure. "Mebbe you'll make a trade with me now, eh?"

"What kind of a trade?"

"You know what I want."

"What?"

"A half interest in the mine."

Bart pressed his lips together, remaining silent for some seconds. Finally, he said:

"Do you reckon I'll make a trade of any kind with such a crooked galoot as you have acknowledged yourself to be?"

"You'll *have* to, if you get anything further out of me, young feller."

"And if I should be fool enough, how do I know this yar yarn amounts to anything? You said you could give me a grip on Stark."

"That's what I meant."

"What kind of a grip—what did he have to do with my father's death?"

"A good deal."

"But what?"

"If I told ye, you'd know," replied Prindle, with a leer. "I an't that big a fool. If you're ready to make a bargain, maybe I'll talk."

The lad had no intention of entering into such a contract with this self-confessed crook and convict; and he considered just how he could force the miner to tell the truth concerning Norman Stone's death.

That he had struck a trail which might lead to astonishing and momentous results he scarcely had a doubt. There had always seemed something singular and inexplicable about the manner of his father's death; and now it seemed this man could clear away the clouds, if he were inclined to do so.

"Look hyar," Bart finally said; "I'll tell you what I'll do. If you——"

At this moment he was interrupted by a terrible uproar in the front of the restaurant. Loud words were uttered, a table was upset, amid a crash of breaking crockery, and then two of the waiters were seen vigorously mauling each other.

Naturally, the boy from the West turned to see what all the racket was about, and, when the combatants were parted, he suddenly bethought himself of the necessity of keeping his eyes on Buck Prindle.

He wheeled around quickly, to make the astonishing discovery that the ex-convict had disappeared!

CHAPTER XII.

THE CAST FOR LIFE.

“GONE!”

For an instant, Bart was almost paralyzed with amazement; but he swiftly recovered.

“Didn’t go out front, so he must have gone—*this way!*”

With one bound, he dashed behind a screen and saw a door that led to the room where the cooking was done. Into this room he darted, to find himself face to face with a German cook, who was dressed in rather soiled white outer garments.

“A man came in hyar!” cried the lad. “Running like a hawse with a burr under its saddle! Which way’d he go?”

“Out dot door,” calmly replied the cook, pointing to an open door that led into a back alley.

Through the doorway leaped Bart, his eyes wide open for a glimpse of the man he was after; but he was not rewarded by the sight of the fleeing thief.

Buck Prindle had not let the grass grow under his feet, well knowing the lad would be hot after him in a very few seconds.

Along the alley ran Bart, looking to the right and left at the doorways, trying to decide which course the miner would be most liable to choose. Through to the point where the alley came out on the main street he rushed; but he might have spared himself the trouble, for it was unavailing.

“Wa-al,” muttered Bart, in thorough disgust, as he slowly retraced his footsteps, still looking searchingly at the doorways, but seeing no one who could give him any information, “that thar’s the biggest fool trick I ever did! Slow! I reckon Mr. Walter St. Omer Stark is just naturally correct, and no mistake! I’m too slow by a heap sight to get out of the way for a snail that’s in a hurry!”

Never in his life had he felt more crestfallen than he did at that moment. After practically capturing the man who stole the stock, he had allowed the crook to slip through his fingers and get away.

As he made his way back to the restaurant, he condemned himself roundly and in the most scathing language, feeling he was deserving of his own scorn.

As he entered the cook room, the German asked him if he overtook the man; but he simply shook his head, walking swiftly into the dining room, where he found a waiter looking around for him. He paid his check at the cashier’s desk, leaving the place immediately.

For hours after this the boy from the West wandered about the streets, his eyes searching the face of every man he met, hoping against hope that some fortunate accident might bring him upon Buck Prindle once more.

He took no note of the flight of time or whither his footsteps led him, his mind being entirely engrossed by a conflicting tumult of thoughts, none of which were pleasant.

He had failed to recover the stock, even after being face to face with the acknowledged thief; but the man had told him some things of a startling and astonishing nature, and awakened within his breast the belief that his unfortunate father had been dealt with foully.

If this were true, he would have another mission in

the East, for it would be his duty to know no rest until the man or men who had brought about the tragedy in the mine were properly punished.

Realizing he was confronted by a mighty problem, his face grew very stern and hard, and the light of a great resolution glowed in his usually drowsy eyes.

"If Cyrus Stark had anything to do with father's death, as well as having afterward swindled mother out of what was justly hers—wa-al, I'll never rest till he is a poor man and has been brought to the round-up bar of justice. I may be no more'n a boy, and a Kansas cow-puncher at that; but I'll find a way of getting squar', or I'm not the son of my father, none whatever."

He said this to himself in a cold and quiet way, but it was as good as a registered resolve.

He was on South Fifth Avenue, with the elevated trains rattling and roaring on the trestle above his head, when he gave a sudden start of surprise, uttering a low exclamation, having discerned on the opposite side of the street two persons whom he knew.

They were Ned Steinway and Walter Stark.

The young man and the boy were talking together earnestly, and, as Bart watched them, they suddenly turned and descended some steps, disappearing into a dark basement.

"Wonder what's down thar?" muttered the lad, as he crossed the street.

He saw a man who seemed to be following Steinway and Walter. This man hesitated a moment, and then also went down the stairs, pushed open a door and disappeared.

Bart was inclined to be venturesome, and it did not take him long to make up his mind how he would act.

"Hyar goes!" he said, resolutely, as he boldly descended the stairs and thrust open the door.

The moment it closed behind him, he found himself in a low, dark passage, at the farthest end of which there was another door. At one side of this door was an open "peephole;" but, as no one was peering out, the young cowboy promptly advanced and tried the door, beyond which he could hear a loud voice distinctly calling off something.

Not a little to his surprise, the door opened promptly to his touch. The moment it did so, he saw a long, narrow, smoky room, that was filled with men who seemed silent and breathless, listening to the clicking of some instrument and the voice of a big, red-faced rough on a stand.

"At the first quarter—Lawrence in the lead, the others bunched; at the half, Lawrence by a length, Fleetwood second, Belle Adams third; third quarter, Fleetwood ahead, Rob Roy second, Belle Adams third, Lawrence off his feet; in the stretch, Fleetwood ahead, Rob Roy gaining, Nemo third."

The suspense seemed intense; and the great throng of men scarcely appeared to breathe, as they listened for the result.

"Rob Roy by a head, Fleetwood second, Nemo third——"

If the man uttered any further announcement, it was drowned by the cries of excitement from the throng; but a sudden and fierce thumping silenced them. A man with a heavy black mustache shot up on the stand, literally snarling:

"Youse blokes want ter let up on dat! See? I'm tryin' ter run dis place on der dead q. t. Dat racket'll bring der cops down on me, an' I'll be pinched. If yer don't let up on it, I'll close me shop. See?"

Bart realized he was in a private poolroom, where men assembled to gamble by wagering money on horse

aces run in different parts of the country; and he had just listened to the result of a particularly exciting race.

Unfortunately for his curiosity, he was given little time to look around, for, at this moment, he heard a familiar voice saying, in a tone of the greatest disgust:

"That's all your tips amount to of late, Steinway! I've dropped a clean five hundred on Lawrence! Come, let's get out."

And then, of a sudden, he found himself face to face with Steinway and Walter Stark. As they saw Bart, the two started back, astonished, Steinway exclaiming:

"Great Scott! He's been following us, Walt!"

"That's what!" broke from the lips of the millionaire's son, as he immediately regained his composure. "I'll fix him this time!"

Then he shouted:

"Hey! hey! Spotter—spotter here!"

The cry raised a tumult, the gamblers surging excitedly and angrily toward the door, near which the trio were.

"Where is he?" demanded several voices. "We'll do him up!"

"There he is!" declared Walter, pointing straight at Bart. "He's a boy hired by the police to pipe off the place."

Bart boldly faced the excited mob, although he realized the false accusation of his enemy had placed him in a dangerous position; for these gamblers were men easily wrought to acts of violence.

Suddenly a man stepped from the crowd and placed a hand on the young Westerner's arm, facing the sports, and saying quietly:

"Gentlemen, the charge is false. This boy is a stranger in the city and from the West, as you can see

by his attire. I give you my word he does not stand in with the police, and is not here for the purpose of causing trouble. I am going out immediately, and he will accompany me."

The moment the speaker appeared, Walter Stark gave a gasp of dismay and tried to slink out of sight. In this he was not very successful, for the searching eyes of the gentleman followed him half scornfully.

"Come!"

The word was spoken in Bart's ear; and then he felt his unknown friend conducting him through the door and along the passage to the street, which was reached by ascending the flight of stairs.

The boy discovered his benefactor was the man he had seen follow Steinway and Walter into the poolroom.

As soon as the street was reached, the stranger said:

"I got you out of a very bad scrape, my boy; for those men would have been sure to do you injury."

"I reckon you're giving me a sure trail, mister," agreed the lad. "I thank you."

"That's all right," smiled the man, as he walked toward a cab that seemed waiting for him at the curb. "I had a purpose in going in there, and I presume you did also. This is the second time I have been able to get you out of a bad fix."

With those words, and no more, he stepped into the cab and was driven swiftly away, without giving the bewildered boy time to utter anything further.

"The second time," muttered Bart, as he walked slowly along the street. "What'd he mean? I know! It must be that thar man's the friend the judge said got me off when Steinway had me arrested. And I don't even know his name!"

Thinking of this, he wandered on and on, passing Union Square, and finally coming to a little park that

was all fenced about with a high iron railing. Near this park were some stables, and out of one of these a man suddenly dashed, hatless and coatless, wildly crying:

“Look out! He’s broke out of the cage! Run—run for your lives!”

Several people who were passing paused and looked at the man, as if they considered him deranged.

But in another moment a terrible roar came from the stable, and out of the door shot the form of a huge beast—an enraged panther!

It seemed that two bounds carried the creature across the street, and then it crouched low to the ground, within ten feet of a bright-looking, tastily-dressed girl, lashing its tail and preparing to leap upon her.

So great was the girl’s horror that she appeared turned to stone, standing still in her tracks. It seemed that nothing could save her, for all the spectators were motionless with terror and dismay.

No, not *all* of them! The boy from the West was the only one who retained his presence of mind, or made a move to save the girl.

Quickly detaching the lariat from his side, he sent it whirling about his head, ran forward a few steps with the lightness of a cat, and made the cast for life.

CHAPTER XIII.

ROPING A PANTHER.

THE escaped panther was on the verge of making a spring at the helpless girl.

As Bart Stone sent the noose sailing through the air, he leaped to the iron fence of the park and made one end of the lariat secure by a quick double-hitch.

Over the head of the terrible animal dropped the noose, with not four feet of rope to spare.

At that very instant the beast leaped for the girl.

The horsehair lariat was of the very finest quality, and its strength and value were tested at that moment.

The panther rose in the air, but was immediately hurled backward to the ground, striking heavily and rolling over and over, stunned, choked, astounded.

The bewildered spectators who had seen it all could scarcely understand what had happened, although they realized the panther had been prevented from reaching its intended victim.

"Run!" shouted Bart to the girl, who was putting out her hands and swaying unsteadily. "The ornary critter may get away. Make a break for cover, and don't delay!"

If she heard his words, she did not understand or had not enough strength to follow his instructions; for she seemed on the point of tottering forward toward the overthrown and defeated animal.

Of a sudden, Bart Stone darted forward, and, unheeding the danger, ran past the panther.

With a snarling yowl, the creature gathered itself and leaped again, this time for the boy.

It was a hasty spring, but once more the horsehair cord saved a human life, for the right forward paw of the infuriated beast touched the back of the boy's woolen shirt, and the claws ripped the garments open, although no further harm was done.

Then the lariat again snatched the panther back and sent it rolling over and over, scratching, snarling, and biting.

Bart was barely in time to catch the fainting form of the girl in his arms, and he lost not a moment in bearing her from the dangerous locality, leaving the panther to escape or be captured.

A man ran to his assistance and told him he could take the unconscious girl into a house near at hand. This Bart did, allowing no one to touch her until she was placed on a couch, after which the lady of the house and the servants set about restoring her to consciousness.

"It was a brave and wonderful act!" declared the man, looking admiringly at Bart. "I saw it from a distance. That girl is indebted to you for her life, my boy!"

Bart blushed with genuine confusion.

"Why, that thar wasn't nothing much," he modestly declared. "A feller as can rope a steer ought to be able to rope any other kind of critter."

"But the daring of it—and the way you ran past the beast and caught the girl as she was falling! It was remarkable!"

Finding that he was to be lionized by the man, Bart soon made an excuse to leave the house, saying he was going back for his "rope."

Outside he found a great crowd had gathered about

the place where he had last seen the cleverly snared beast, and he wondered what was happening. Running toward the spot, he was not long in discovering the animal's trainer had arrived and promptly caused a substitute cage to be brought from the stable, where the panther was being kept for a week, preparatory to the beginning of an engagement at a popular animal show.

The trainer had, with little loss of time, succeeded in getting the escaped beast into the cage, which was now surrounded by several very bold policemen, who had discreetly kept at a comfortable distance until they were sure the creature was beyond doing harm.

Already were there several newspaper reporters on the spot, and they were eagerly seeking "particulars."

To Bart's dismay, he discovered the trainer had cut the horse-hair lariat as soon as the panther was caged.

"Look hyar!" cried the boy from the West, coming forward; "what'd you want to do that thar thing for? Didn't you know this yar rope was worth a clean hundred dollars, and you've just naturally spoiled it for good and all!"

The man looked at him in surprise.

"Was it yours," he asked.

"That's what it was; and I want the galoot that cut it to pay for it plenty quick!"

"And did you lasso the panther?"

"Yes, I roped the critter."

"That's the very boy!" cried several of those who had witnessed Bart's skillful feat.

In a moment, the surprised lad found himself seized by the energetic reporters, every one of whom was asking him a different question, all speaking together. There poured a perfect torrent of inquiries upon him, wanting to know his name, age, place of birth, where he belonged, how he happened to be in New York, how

he learned to throw a lariat, who the girl was he had saved, and forty other things.

"Wa-al this is worse'n a cyclone," gasped the bewildered boy. "For time sake, let me get clear of this yere razzle! I can't hear myself think!"

But he could not escape the reporters until they had obtained answers to at least fifty per cent. of their questions, the answers to the other fifty per cent. being supplied by themselves.

By that time the owner of the panther had arrived, and after a short consultation with the trainer, this man made no delay in finding Bart.

"Are you the boy?" he eagerly inquired. "Say, you may not know it, but you've made a ten-strike to-day. Why, the accounts of this affair will be in every evening paper! It's a great ad.—great! And you—why, I'll shove up a wad you'll be offered an engagement at the show to appear with Stanley, the panther."

"To appear! What do you mean?" questioned the astonished lad.

"To show yourself at the performances, of course. It'd be a great card. Think of the crowds coming to see the ferocious, untamed Stanley, and the boy who lassoed the beast when it had escaped, and was at liberty in the streets of New York! By jove! this ought to pay you a good roll. It'll make you famous."

"Wa-al, I didn't s'pose people in the East'd make such a rumpus over a little thing!" exclaimed Bart in disgust.

"Little thing!" spluttered the man. "Are you crazy, boy! I understand you saved a young lady from being killed by Stanley. This is great! It's the luckiest day I've hit in a year!"

The man was plainly delighted, but he was not so pleased when Bart insisted he must pay for the lariat.

He refused to believe the horse-hair rope could be worth a hundred dollars; but he finally decided to pay the money "on account of the ad.," as he expressed it.

Bart pocketed the money, but, in truth, he would rather have the lariat in perfect condition, as the rope had belonged to his father, and he set a great store by it.

Then the owner of the panther, whose name was Zachery Pulsifer, insisted that Bart should accompany him to his hotel and take dinner with him that night. The beast was left to the care of the trainer and some assistants.

Bart would not go anywhere until he knew if the girl he had saved had recovered from her faint, and so Mr. Pulsifer accompanied him to the house where she had been taken.

When they reached the place the man of the house hurried the boy to the parlor, saying:

"The young lady's father is here, and he wants to see the brave lad who saved his daughter. Here he is."

To Bart's astonishment, he found himself face to face with his mysterious friend, the gentleman who had twice done him a favor, having that day saved him from the mob of angry gamblers in the poolroom.

CHAPTER XIV.

HONORS TO THE HERO.

"YOU?"

Both man and boy uttered the word, as they stared at each other in surprise.

"I might have known it was you by the description," the gentleman hastily added; "but I was so excited I scarcely thought of anything but Ferda."

"Wa-al, I never dreamed of you!" confessed Bart.

"My dear boy," and the gentleman grasped the lad's hand, "I owe you a debt that I can never repay!"

"Don't!" protested the confused youth. "It makes me feel like I had been kerfopped by a burro—and that's onerary! If this yar thing keeps up, I'll take to my hoofs and stampede for tall timber heap soon."

"He is a brave and noble lad, sir," cut in Mr. Zachery Pulsifer, pressing forward. "Why, this is a great snap for him! Being a man of business, sir, and an artist in my line, I immediately appreciate an accident that gives me an ad. of this sort. Every paper will have it: Stanley, the untamed panther! Roaming through New York as if in his own native forest! The magnificent beast owned by Mr. Zachery Pulsifer, the world's greatest collector of wild animals! The——"

"I beg your pardon, sir," rather brusquely interrupted the girl's father; "this is no time or place for you to go into rhapsodies over the value of your ad. I presume you are Mr. Zachery Pulsifer, the owner of the panther?"

"I have that honor, sir," was the reply, as the speaker drew himself up with dignity.

"Then I may as well inform you it is possible I shall bring suit against you."

"Wh-wh-what?" almost shouted the astonished Mr. Pulsifer, looking staggered. "Bring suit against me? 'Cause why?"

"For maintaining a dangerous nuisance in that stable. The escape of the panther is all the proof I want. I can make you pay heavy damages."

Zachery Pulsifer collapsed, all his dignity leaving him in a moment, as he excitedly spluttered:

"You can't be in earnest—you can't! Why, it's preposterous! Your daughter was not harmed. It will make her famous! Man alive, her name will be in the papers—she'll be advertised!"

"That's one reason why I think of bringing suit against you," calmly declared the gentleman. "I object to such advertising very decidedly."

This was more than the owner of the panther could understand, and for a few minutes he poured forth a torrent of protests and entreaties. He was finally cut off by the man of the house, who politely hinted that he had better withdraw.

"All right," mumbled Mr. Pulsifer, in disgust. "It's plain some poeple don't know a good thing when they see it. I am going now. I shall be prepared to defend any suit. Mr. Stone, you are coming with me to——"

"Excuse me," said the gentleman whose daughter Bart had saved, "I have the strongest claim on him. He will remain with me, I think. Eh, my lad?"

"Wa-al," decided Bart, "if I had my choice, I'd a heap rather be all by my lonesome out on a prairie. As it is, I reckon I'll stay hyar."

"Very well," bowed Pulsifer, stiffly, "if you see fit to decline my invitation to dinner I have nothing further to say. However, I shall be pleased to see you any time. Here's my card. Will you give me your address? I may wish to communicate with you."

"His address for the next few days, at least will be my home," said the father of the girl, giving a number on Madison Avenue.

A minute later Zachery Pulsifer had taken his departure.

Both men laughed when he was gone, and Bart's mysterious friend observed:

"The fear of a suit rather cooled Mr. Pulsifer. I fancied that would be the easiest way to get rid of him, and it was plain he is not a very desirable acquaintance. I advise you to look out for men of this sort, my boy. But now let me thank you again and again for your brave and noble act. You——"

"Say, mister," broke in the boy, "I don't reckon I've done any more'n squar' accounts. I owed you a heap, for I judge you are the one who went to the court and got me out of that bad fix when Steinway had me arrested."

"Well, you are right on that point," smiled the gentleman.

"How'd you happen to do it?"

"I was in the Fifth Avenue Hotel when you accused the thief and pursued him. I saw the whole affair. I was afterward with the spectators who watched you send Walter Stark sprawling after he tried to strike you. I saw you were in the right all the time, and my sympathy was enlisted, causing me to resolve to get you out of the scrape. When this fellow Steinway and young Walter Stark heard I had decided to see that you had fair play they simply dropped the matter."

"Wa-al, it's right lucky for me you took a hand in the business, I'll allow. And then you got me out of another scrape to-day."

"I stopped at Fourteenth Street to look after some business, and was on my way up town when I heard of the panther escaping in this neighborhood. Then I came over, little thinking it was my own child who had been so nearly killed by the beast. From the window, Ferda, who had recovered, saw me passing and had me called in here. And now it turns out you are the boy who saved her!"

The delighted gentleman wrung Bart's hand again, assuring the boy of his gratitude, while the latter still remained confused.

"What is your name, my lad?"

"Bartley Stone."

"Stone. That is a good solid name. I once had a schoolmate by that name. I am Roger Van Worth, and this"—as a rather pale-faced but pretty girl entered the room, accompanied by an older lady—"is Ferda, my daughter, who owes her life to your bravery."

The girl came forward and held out her white hand, a bit of warm color mounting to her cheeks as Bart hesitatingly touched the fingers, bowing low, his broad-brimmed hat in his hand. There was a certain rude gallantry in his manner that told his instincts were of a gentlemanly sort.

"I am right glad to meet Miss Van Worth," declared Bart, choking somewhat over the words.

"And I am thankful to know the brave young man who saved me from that awful beast," earnestly assured Ferda, looking him full in the face with her great brown eyes. "I have wanted to know you ever since—ever since I first saw you," she finished, hesitating and glancing quickly at her father.

"To-day is not the first time she observed you, Mr. Stone," explained Roger Van Worth. "She happened to be passing the Fifth Avenue Hotel as you upset Walter Stark, and she saw it all. When I came home she asked me about all that happened, and I will confess she influenced me to go down to court and see the judge on your behalf."

The girl was now blushing in confusion, and Bart suddenly realized how extremely pretty and charming she really was. Again he bowed low before her, speaking with a great deal of feeling:

"I just naturally judge it was the work of Providence that gave me that thar chance to do her a turn and kind of squar' things."

Bart was then introduced to the gentleman and lady of the house, and the praises they showered on him made him once more feel that he would give almost anything to be alone on a Kansas prairie.

Finally, when this was all over, Mr. Van Worth went out to look for a carriage, soon returning to state one was waiting at the door.

The boy from the West would have made his escape from his friends if possible, but they would not hear of such a thing, and he soon found himself in the closed carriage with Roger Van Worth and his pretty daughter, being carried toward the millionaire's elegant home on Madison Avenue.

CHAPTER XV.

A SURPRISING DISCOVERY.

BART was literally astounded by the elegance of Roger Van Worth's home, and he felt greatly out of place and embarrassed, although the millionaire and his pretty daughter did their best to put him at his ease.

Ferda's mother had been dead several years, and as she was the only child and idol of her father, she was the practical mistress of the house, although a maiden aunt resided there and acted as a sort of chaperon toward her.

The boy tried to get away before dinner, thinking how unsuited for such an occasion he must appear, but he found his efforts useless, for Mr. Van Worth would not listen to such a thing.

"Didn't you hear me tell Mr. Zachery Pulsifer your address for the next few days would be this house? That meant that you were to remain right here. Never mind how you are dressed. You are from a part of the country where people wear such clothes from early in the morning until late at night——"

"And then a right good many of them wear such clothes all night," put in the boy.

"That is a fact," smiled Mr. Van Worth. "Here is Ferda. She has come down prepared to chat with you, while I run out to keep an appointment. I will be on hand for dinner."

So the boy and girl were left together, and they got along famously, for Bart overcame his diffidence after

a time, and talked unreservedly of his home in the West and the wild, free life he knew so well. Indeed, he grew rather eloquent in his way, and Ferda listened with the deepest interest.

The girl had more than half suspected Bart was illiterate, his manner of speech seeming to prove this, but when she came to sound him she was astonished at his actual fund of knowledge. He was a good English scholar, could translate French, although he did not speak it very well, and could read Latin as well as Ferda herself. His Western accent and vernacular he had unconsciously acquired by constantly mingling with people who always spoke in that manner.

They were discussing books and authors, and Bart had told Ferda many interesting things about great novelists and poets, showing an astonishing familiarity with all the masters of literature, when Mr. Van Worth came in quietly and stood listening to them. The gentleman was no less astonished than Ferda at Bart's knowledge, and his respect for the boy advanced a step.

"I am glad to see you are enjoying yourselves," he smiled, as he came forward. "Here is something that may interest you, Mr. Stone," and he passed Bart a newspaper.

It was New York's most sensational evening paper, and on the first page was a two-column article, the "scare headings" of which were as follows:

"LASSOED A PANTHER!

Stanley, the savage monarch of the forest, free in the city streets!

FEARFUL PERIL OF PRETTY FERDA VAN WORTH.

Saved from a frightful fate by a seventeen-year-old boy from the West.

Bold Bartley Stone roped the raging beast."

Then followed a picturesque and rather inaccurate account of the whole affair, but what literally astounded Bart and took away his breath was the fact that his picture was printed in the paper.

To be sure, it was not a first class likeness, but then it did resemble him.

Roger Van Worth laughed softly as he saw the speechless boy stare helplessly at the printed "story" and the picture, utterly unable to express himself.

"That's what they call newspaper enterprise in New York," he observed.

"But—but, I just naturally don't understand it! How'd they get my picture?"

"One of those reporters must have been armed with a camera and taken a snap-shot at you."

"But it's been such a short time. I plumb can't understand how they got the picture made and all this yarn into print."

"It was certainly quick work; but every late evening paper in the city has something about the affair, although none of them spread themselves as this one did. We would have been run over by reporters here, but when I went out I detached the electric wires, so not a bell in the house would ring, and gave directions to the servants to admit no one. The butler tells me six or eight men have been vainly pushing at the door button at various times since."

"Wa-al," slowly spoke Bart, "I must allow I don't like this yere thing none whatever. It seems foolish to me to make such a rumpus over the business."

"You are modest, my lad," said Roger Van Worth. "To-night you are the best known and most popular boy in New York City."

It took some time for Bart to realize this was actually the truth, and then, of a sudden, he thought of his

mother, away out West in her Kansas home. He would send her the papers, and he knew how her cheeks would flush and her eyes fill with tears of pride and joy. Chance and his skill with the lariat had made him famous for the time.

They talked but a few moments after Mr. Van Worth's return, and then dinner was announced. Ferda's aunt appeared, and they all went down together.

The boy still felt out of place, but his new friends were agreeably surprised to discover his table manners, while not elegant or in exact accordance with fixed rules, were those of a natural gentleman. If he did not dip the spoon from him in eating soup, he also did not tip the plate to get the last drop, and not once did he put his knife in his mouth.

And Roger Van Worth inwardly decided this boy who sat at his table, clothed in the garments worn on the Western ranches, was more of a gentleman than ninety-nine per cent. of the city-bred youths with so-called aristocratic parents.

As for Ferda, there was a positive glow of admiration in her eyes every time they rested on Bart.

The conversation flowed along freely, and when 'desert was reached, Mr. Van Worth asked Bart how he happened to be in New York. By this time the boy was ready to open his heart, and he quietly explained his reasons for leaving his home and seeking to secure the stock of the White Horse Mine.

The millionaire listened with ever-increasing interest to the lad's story, expressing genuine disappointment as Bart told of his rebuffs.

"You have certainly had wretched luck," said Mr. Van Worth. "You deserve to secure those shares, and I believe you will get them in the end. But I know

from experience Cyrus Stark is an utterly unscrupulous man. I have dealt with him on Wall Street, and he once beat me out of something like seventy thousand dollars by a direct lie. Although we have apparently remained friendly, I vowed then I would get even with him some day, and I mean to keep my word. I am simply awaiting the opportunity to do so by fair means, for I will not resort to his own crooked methods.

"As for Walter Stark, I believe him a chip of the old block, even though he did seem like a respectable young fellow. He has been very friendly with Ferda, and I resolved to discover if he were the sort of a youth she should know. That is why I followed him into the pool-room to-day. His companion, Edward Steinway, is decidedly questionable, although of good parents; and it is plain Steinway has led Walter to gamble and frequent low resorts. Hereafter, my doors are closed to Walter Stark, and Ferda is forbidden to associate with him at all."

"For which Ferda does not feel very bad," smiled the girl. Then she went on, impulsively.

"Oh, father! wouldn't it be jolly if you could help Mr. Stone get ahead of Cyrus Stark in this matter! You could get square with that man in such a way."

Mr. Van Worth looked doubtful.

"Perhaps you are right," he slowly said. "I had not thought of that. I like Bartley for his manliness, and I feel boundlessly in his debt. He reminds me of my old schoolmate, Norman Stone."

"Why!" exclaimed Bart, excitedly, "that was my father's name!"

"Indeed!" ejaculated Mr. Van Worth. "It cannot be possible your father was the Norman Stone who was my schoolmate and boyhood chum!"

"How do you know?" broke from Ferda's lips, and

her cheeks glowed with enthusiasm. "Perhaps he was! Oh, wouldn't that be strange—wouldn't it be jolly!"

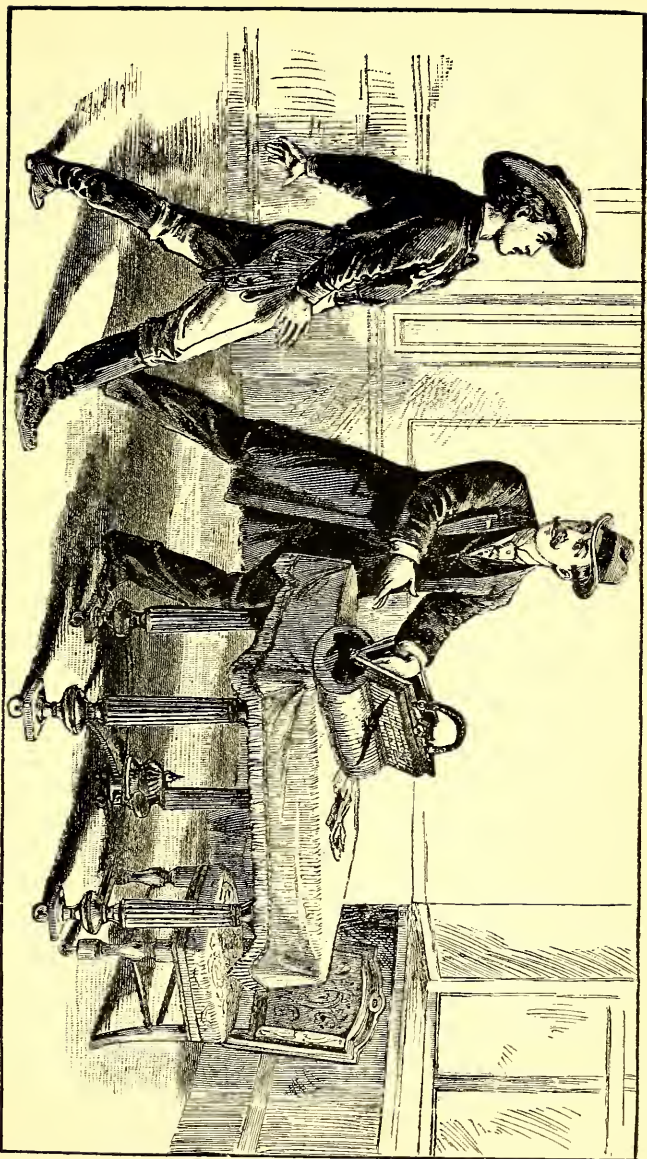
"Where did your father come from?" questioned the millionaire.

"New Hampshire," answered the boy from the West.

"What part of New Hampshire?"

"Hooksett."

"That's the very State and town!" came excitedly from Roger Van Worth's lips. "I lost track of Norman, but now I remember he went out West somewhere. My lad, I believe your father was actually my boyhood chum!"



"The certificates have been stolen!"

(See page 40)

CHAPTER XVI.

A STRONG ALLY.

BEFORE they left the dinner table it was decided beyond a doubt that Roger Van Worth and Norman Stone had really been schoolmates and chums.

This caused the New York millionaire to look with renewed and heightened friendship and regard upon the boy who had saved his child from the panther. Indeed, a genuine feeling of affection for Bartley sprang up in the man's breast and made him resolve to assist this brave boy in the battle for his rights.

Ferda was delighted, and in her charming, girlish way, she openly expressed her pleasure.

"It is perfectly lovely!" she exclaimed, her cheeks flushed and eyes glowing. "And to think this discovery came about because I walked down to see Nettie Sprague and was nearly eaten up by a horrid panther. Isn't it strange?"

"'God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform,'" quoted the maiden aunt, who was very religiously inclined.

When the dinner was quite over, Mr. Van Worth said to Bart:

"Come with me to the library. I want to have a quiet talk with you, my boy."

Ferda understood what that meant, and she did not venture to intrude, but when she bade Bart good-night, she held out her shapely hand and gave him an impulsive pressure as he clasped it with his brown fingers.

The boy from the West felt that fortune had smiled upon him in his darkest hour of trouble and despair.

He was very thankful toward his new-found friends for their kindness, as he followed Roger Van Worth into the handsome library and sat down in a big comfortable chair, as directed by the man.

For some moments Mr. Van Worth paced the floor in a moody manner, and when he paused he was pinching his under lip with a thumb and forefinger, while he gazed steadily at the son of his old schoolmate and comrade.

"So poor Norman is dead?" he finally murmured, a tender light in his eyes and a softened look on his strong face. "It is thus boyhood friends drift apart and are lost to each other forever. I used to think of him often, but the bustle of city life and the constant struggles of money-getting gradually drove him from my mind, and, till now, I have scarcely paused in years to allow memories of the old days—the dear old days—to intrude upon me.

"Norman was a jolly fellow. I can see him now as he used to look with his bare feet, chubby face and yellow straw hat, in the crown of which was a hole that often allowed a lock of his long hair to protrude. Our mothers used to cut our hair then in the universal roundabout fashion, and sometimes when the household duties pressed hard upon them, the shocks were sadly neglected.

"Norman and I stood by each other through thick and thin, and I recall only one quarrel that we had. I was the taller and older, and I used to consider myself the superior, but one day he got tired of being bossed, and rebelled. Then we had it—and he gave me a beautiful pair of black eyes, bless his dear soul!

"I remember the old pond and the raft from which

we used to fish for pickerel and bull-heads—and the 'Swimmin' Hole,' where we often disported ourselves in direct disobedience to our parents' commands—and how his father came down one day and caught him in the water and gave him a good drubbing with a birch withe.

"We often planned on what we would do when we became men. I was going to become a great explorer and go to Africa. I believe I had been reading about Livingstone, Sir Francis Bacon, or somebody who had traveled up the Nile. Norman had learned a few simple tricks of legerdemain, and it was his fixed resolve to become a great magician and travel over the country giving shows and capturing dollars.

"Such were the dreams of boyhood. And now poor Norman is dead and gone!"

He cleared his throat with a rasping sound, turning to produce a handkerchief and blow his nose in a vigorous attempt to cover his emotion. After a few seconds he turned back and sat down near Bart.

"My lad," he said, "it seems that fate has brought us together. You have told me your story, but I fancied you did not tell everything. Was I right?"

"You were," acknowledged Bart.

"I do not wish to pry into your secrets, but I stand ready to give you whatever assistance I can in this battle against a man who has wronged you. If you told me all——"

"I will," impulsively broke in the boy from the West. "Thar's not much more to tell, but I reckon I have reasons to believe my father came to his death in an underhand manner."

Mr. Van Worth started and looked doubly interested, while Bart continued:

"I told you how I unmasked the thief, but I did not

tell you he let fall words which led me to believe father was foully dealt with."

He then went on and related all that had passed within the restaurant, and Roger Van Worth's face grew stern and cold as he listened. At the end, the man was on his feet, agitated with horror and indignation.

"If your suspicions are correct," he hoarsely said—"if the words of that crook were true, Cyrus Stark is a blacker-hearted villain than I ever imagined. It is my duty to the memory of my old schoolmate to see that the wretch receives his merited deserts, and I propose to follow this matter up faithfully. Stark shall no longer enjoy his ill-gotten gains if there is a way to reach him and bring him to justice."

If ever Roger Van Worth spoke in earnest he did at that moment, and Bart had found an ally who would prove invaluable to him.

"To-morrow," the millionaire went on, "I will engage the best detectives in the city to track down Buck Prindle and recover the stock. That is the first thing to be done."

Then followed a long talk between the man and boy, during which they agreed on a plan for the campaign against Cyrus Stark and his associate sharps.

Before he slept that night, Bart wrote a long, hopeful letter to his mother. He also placed in a wrapper two or three of the papers containing accounts of the lassoing of the panther, and Mr. Van Worth sent them to be deposited in a corner mail-box.

The tired boy slept well that night, rising greatly refreshed in the morning.

At thirty minutes past ten in the forenoon Jubal Heep was in his office, engaged in earnest conversation with Cyrus Stark, who had come to town the day be-

fore, when the door opened and Roger Van Worth walked in.

"Ah! how do you do, Van Worth," saluted Stark, familiarly. "Glad to see you."

"I'm first-rate, Stark," was the quiet reply, as Mr. Van Worth pretended not to see the hand that was extended toward him. "Heard you were out of town."

"I was. Came in last night. Tried to get away from business. No go. Wanted to catch fish, and now——"

"You have come back to catch suckers, eh?"

Stark looked surprised, and then laughed saying:

"You're not given to joking, Van Worth. It's something new for you. Suppose you came in to see Heep?"

"Yes; I wanted to have a little business talk with him, if he could spare the time."

"I am quite at liberty, sir—quite at liberty," assured the lawyer, rubbing his nose with his finger and looking doubtfully at Van Worth. "What can I——"

Again the door opened, this time to admit Bartley Stone, who promptly advanced into the room, a light of satisfaction in his eyes as he saw Cyrus Stark.

"You are the very person I wished to strike, Mr. Stark."

The man looked at the boy in a disdainful manner, retorting:

"I think you have made a mistake. I have no dealings with striplings."

Bart flushed, but held his temper, saying quietly:

"Maybe you'll have something to do with me, sir. Out whar I come from, some boys get to be men a heap sight sooner than boys do hyar. My name's Bartley Stone, and I'm the son of your pard as was, Norman Stone."

"I remember him," and Stark's lip curled, as he caressed his black beard. "Died in debt to me—never got what was due—dead loss."

The flush left the face of the Western lad, and he was unable to keep the indignant ring out of his voice as he cried:

"My father was in debt to no man when he died! I do not think you have any reason to speak of him in that yar way, and I don't like it none whatever!"

Stark laughed outright, as he picked up a half-smoked cigar and began to chew on it, as it was no longer burning.

"Hear the young whippersnapper!" was his contemptuous exclamation. "Oh, well! he's only a boy. What do you want of me, youngster? My time is valuable."

"I purchased the entire stock of the White Hawse Mine from your agent, Mr. Ira D. Wilson, but before he could deliver the shares, they were roped by a thief. I paid him fifty dollars to bind the bargain, and now I want to squar' for the rest."

As he said this, Bart took a fat roll of bills from his pocket and stepped to the square table in the center of the room, at which Cyrus Stark was sitting.

"Hold on!" admonished the man. "I don't know a thing about any such transaction. Mr. Wilson is the man for you to deal with."

"Where can I find him?"

"In Europe."

"What?"

"He sailed yesterday afternoon," calmly declared Cyrus Stark, a gleam of triumph in his small eyes.

CHAPTER XVII.

BART'S ACCUSATION.

THIS was, for a moment, a staggerer for Bart; but the boy quickly recovered.

"Wa-al, it an't just naturally needful that I do up this yar business with him. I can bring a right smart bit of witnesses as will sw'ar he acknowledged the trade on the sidewalk in front of the Fifth Avenue Hotel."

Stark snapped his fingers.

"If Mr. Wilson made such a bargain as you claim, he overreached himself, young man."

"How is that?"

"Mr. Heep, my lawyer here, intrusted that stock in his hands to be disposed of in England. Ira Wilson had no authority to sell a single share in this country. Mr. Heep was quite capable to attend to anything of that sort."

"That's right! that's right!" nodded Heep. "Mr. Stark is correct in this matter. You will have to look to Wilson for the fifty dollars, young fellow. As for the shares, you have not purchased them, and you cannot obtain them at any price."

It certainly seemed as if the boy was squarely balked in his purpose, being no match for the scheming rascal who had swindled his mother; but still he would not give up. For an instant his eyes met those of Roger Van Worth, who was listening with apparent unconcern, and he saw encouragement in the glance of his millionaire friend.

"That thar's very well, Mr. Stark; but I give you fair warning I shall make a right smart rustle for the shares. Do you refuse to accept this money?"

"Certainly I do."

"Wa-al, I have put detectives out after the thief, and when I get possession of the certificates, I shall do my level best to hold them by law."

Cyrus Stark smiled grimly, retorting:

"You are troubling yourself for nothing, boy. You may as well call in your detectives."

Bart felt his heart sink.

"Call them in? Why?"

"They may find the thief, but they will not find the stock."

"Why?"

"Because it is no longer in his possession."

"Then where is it?"

"Where I can put my hand on it when I want to do so. It is plain you came on from Kansas with an idea you were going to get the best of me in this matter; but I advise you to go back as soon as possible."

"That's correct, governor!" cried a familiar voice; and Walter Stark, who had quietly entered a few seconds before, came forward, smiling scornfully at Bart. "I told this remarkable individual from the wild and woolly West that he was altogether too slow for this part of the country, and it is possible he may tumble to the fact that I was right."

It was with the greatest difficulty the Kansas lad held himself in check, as he returned:

"Out whar I come from people have a way of fighting as long as they can wiggle, and you'll find I'm built on that yar plan. You seem to have the best of me right now, Mr. Stark, but I don't propose to give up."

"Oh, all right. You are simply putting yourself to lots of bother for nothing. The old mine may not be worth anything, after all, but I'll soon have that point settled, as I have sent an expert on to examine it. If there is anything in it, you may be sure the stock will remain beyond your reach.

"Now, I trust you will have sense enough to withdraw and give me no further trouble at present. If you continue to annoy me I shall have you arrested."

That was more than Bart could swallow. All his pent-up passion burst forth.

"Arrest if you dare, Mr. Cyrus Stark! If justice was done, I reckon you'd be the one arrested! You're not only a swindler of women, but thar's a blacker stain of crime on your soul!"

"Young dog!" hissed Stark, starting to his feet. "Do you dare make such talk to me?"

"Yes; and I dare make more. I dare say that if the whole black truth was known, you'd make a right peert subject for a lynching bee!"

"Heep! Heep! Will you have this in your office? Throw him out!"

"Stop! The galoot that lays a paw on me will get hurt plenty quick! I want to tell you, Mr. Cyrus Stark, that I know how my father was killed!"

The millionaire scoundrel recoiled, his face paling and a look of absolute terror entering his eyes.

"How—he—was—killed!" he gasped, his voice shaking. And then, with a mighty effort, he recovered, to go on: "He was killed by a premature blast—it was an accident."

"An accident well planned!"

"Do you dare insinuate——"

"You saw him when he died—or, at least, you were one of the last to see him alive."

"What of that?"

"A heap, Mr. Cyrus Stark. The time is not far distant when you'll be rounded up by the law and forced to swallow the dose you deserve."

These words had flowed hotly from the lips of the speaker, and the witnesses of the scene were impressed by what they beheld and heard.

Now, however, Walter Stark, fairly boiling with fury, cried out:

"What's the dirty cur trying to get through him, governor? Is he accusing *you* of killing somebody?"

"No, no!" hastily answered the man. "It's all a mistake! The boy wouldn't dare!"

"Well, it seems to me that he *has* dared," snapped Walter; "and I propose to put a new face on him for it! I'll throw him out on his neck, that's what I'll do!"

"By this time you ought to know better'n to try that thar trick," came from Bart's lips, as the other boy advanced upon him. "You'll get hurt again, or I don't know shucks!"

"Bah! It was an accident before. This time——"

He finished by darting at the young cowboy and clutching him about the waist, obtaining both under holds. It certainly seemed he had such an advantage that Bart would be easily handled, and Walter cried:

"Open the door! I'll throw him— Ug-g-g-gh!"

The words ended with a choking groan, the speaker being unable to utter another sound, for while Bart's left arm clasped him tightly around the shoulders, the Western lad's right forearm had been inserted under Walter's chin, and a single strong thrust forced the head of the millionaire's son back until the bones of his neck cracked and his eyes protruded.

In truth, had he chosen, the Kansas boy could have

broken the neck of his adversary, in that manner. As it was, Walter felt himself robbed of his strength in a moment, and he sank limply into Bart's grasp.

Cyrus Stark had dropped weakly into his chair at the table, where he sat staring at the two boys, seeming dazed.

Bart Stone lifted his foe from the floor and gave him a whirling fling that sent him sliding across the table, to sweep pen, ink, and paper to the floor and plunge his head fairly into the pit of his father's stomach. Father and son tumbled in a sprawling heap to the floor, their downfall being accompanied by a splintering crash, as the chair was broken and ruined.

When they gathered themselves up, some moments later, the boy from the West and Roger Van Worth had left the office.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PREPARING FOR THE RACE.

"MY boy," said Roger Van Worth, when he and Bart were seated in a cab that was rolling up Broadway, "you are a wonder! Walter Stark is the champion all-round amateur athlete of the Trojan Club, and he has a record for doing up several professionals, yet you handled him almost as if he were a child. It is remarkable!"

"It's all in knowing things he does not suspect I know," was the reply of the rather gloomy-faced young Westerner. "He reckoned he was tackling a critter as didn't know shucks about fighting, and that's whar he fooled himself. I'm just naturally slow until I get woke up, and then I'm quicker'n a cat and stronger'n a mustang. If he'd 'lowed I knew anything about the tricks of fighting, I judge I'd had a harder time in the scrimmages with him."

"Well, it must be you have taught him a lesson he will not forget. It was beautiful to see you fling him across the table onto his father and send them both sprawling on the floor. You upset them neatly."

"But not half so completely as I was upset myself," was the rather doleful rejoinder.

Mr. Van Worth glanced hastily at his youthful companion and saw Bart was looking completely crest-fallen.

"Cheer up, lad," was his advice. "You are not out of the fight, by any means."

"Wa-al, it just naturally looks as if I didn't have any show now."

"It certainly does look as if Stark had the best of it at present, but you cannot tell how things will turn."

"He has the stock."

"Yes."

"And he'll take good care I don't get my hands on it. Thar doesn't seem to be any show to beat him."

"It can't be you mean to give up?"

"Wa-al, none whatever; but, for all that, it seems that I'm clean out of the game."

"Remember, I have promised to aid you. Stark is a speculator—a gambler on a large scale. While my dealings on the street have always been what are designated as 'legitimate,' I am now ready to meet this man on his own ground, and fight him with his own methods, as that seems the only way to punish him. He is wealthy, it is said, but I believe I have enough money to crush him in less than six months, if I set myself to do it. And you shall aid me, Bart."

"I? How?"

"I will find a way. How much money have you?"

"About five thousand dollars, I reckon."

"That may be enough. If you need more, I will let you have it, and take your paper as security."

"I'm only a boy, Mr. Van Worth. My paper——"

"Don't worry about that. If I am willing to accept it, why shouldn't I do so?"

Bart was somewhat staggered by the proposal of his new-found friend, but he felt a glow of gratitude, and his spirits rose, for, with such an ally, there might still be hope of accomplishing his purpose. Impulsively he grasped Mr. Van Worth's hand, crying:

"You are too kind, sir! I don't reckon I've done anything to——"

"You saved Ferda, and your father was my boyhood friend. I have not entered into this matter in a half-hearted way, my lad—I am in it to crush the man who wronged your mother by cheating her out of her rights, and may have brought about your father's death. Trust me."

"I will."

For some moments they were silent, while the cab rumbled over the stones. Suddenly, Roger Van Worth asked:

"Can you run?"

"Wa-al, a little."

"But, for my purpose, you must be able to run more than a little."

"I've followed a hawse for three hours."

"That was on the stretch, and therefore a test of endurance. Can you make a swift dash for one hundred or two hundred yards?"

"I reckon."

"If I thought you could win," muttered the man, in a musing way; and then he was silent.

Wondering what this meant, Bart ventured to ask:

"What is it you want me to win?"

"A race."

"What kind of a race?"

"I believe it is to be a hundred-and-fifty-yard sprint."

"When? Where?"

"Day after to-morrow, at the Rink. It is to be under the management of the Trojan Club, and Walter Stark is expected to carry off first prize. I think I see a way to begin getting even with Cyrus Stark."

Bart's eyes flashed, and his nostrils dilated, while he eagerly asked:

"Is thar any way for me to run against Walter Stark?"

"I am a member of the club, and so I can enter you, if I choose; but I do not want you to run unless you stand a good show of winning."

"How can we settle that?"

"I'll have to see you run. If you think it is any use, I will take you into the country this afternoon and give you a chance to show what you are made of."

"I'd surely like to try it, sir."

"Then we'll consider that settled. As soon as we have eaten lunch, we'll go out beyond the Harlem, and you shall show your speed."

That afternoon Roger Van Worth and Bartley Stone, accompanied by a professional runner and trainer, proceeded to the country, stopping at a secluded hotel. Mr. Van Worth had brought the proper racing rig, and from the hotel the three made their way to an abandoned trotting park, where the test was to take place.

The professional, whose name was Joe Yates, regarded Bart with something like amusement in his eyes, as if he could scarcely refrain from laughing at the idea that this boy should imagine he could run, for the Western lad certainly seemed heavy and not a little awkward in his high boots and cowboy rig.

But when Bart had stripped and donned the tights, his air appeared quite changed, causing Yates to whistle softly under his breath and gaze admiringly at the lad's magnificently developed legs.

The boy from the West was certainly built for an athlete, but he still seemed slow and sleepy in his movements. All this time, Bart remembered his first race with Walter Stark, and he felt sure he could beat the son of his enemy, for he had threatened to pass Walter Stark when the young fellow struck him senseless with his cane. But he wished to convince Mr. Van Worth of his ability.

The result of the test race not only convinced the millionaire, but it astounded the professional sprinter, as Joe Yates was forced to his best pace, or he would have been beaten around the track. He came in blowing heavily, with Bart close at his shoulder, and, as he dropped on a bench, he gasped:

"That boy is a corker! Give me a week, and I'll have him so he'll beat any amateur in this country."

"But there is not a week to spare," said the delighted spectator of the test. "He must run against a first-class man day after to-morrow."

"At the Rink?"

"Yes."

"Stark, the amateur?"

"That is the fellow."

"I will fix him to-morrow so he'll stand more than an even chance of winning the match."

"Do it. Keep your mouth closed, and name your price. You will both remain here at the hotel, and the boy is to be trained discreetly. I am going back to the city and enter him as an unknown. There is a decided surprise in store for Cyrus Stark, who, I understand, has backed his son heavily."

If Bart had not been in perfect condition and fresh from the plains and mountains, the training he was put through by Joe Yates would have completely incapacitated him for the struggle to come; but the professional found the boy hard as iron and able to endure almost anything.

When Mr. Van Worth appeared again, late the next day, Bart was able to hold his own with Yates, who once more declared him a marvel.

"I succeeded in entering him as Unknown," said the millionaire, "although I had to swear he was not a professional and had never run for a purse. I suppose

you think, Yates, that, barring accident, he stands a good show of winning?"

"I'm certain of it, Mr. Van Worth."

"I am glad of that," smiled Bart's friend, "for I have succeeded in placing a wager of ten thousand dollars with Cyrus Stark that my Unknown will beat his son."

CHAPTER XIX.

"Go!"

THE Rink was crowded on the evening of the great athletic exhibition, which proved an unparalleled success in the history of the Trojan Club. The patrons of the club were of the most aristocratic and wealthy class, the members being sons of bankers, brokers, rich merchants, etc., with an occasional wealthy older member, like Cyrus Stark and Roger Van Worth. As a natural result, the spectators at the exhibition were men who could command millions, and whose credit was unimpeachable.

Stark himself, evidently in the best of humors, sat in a conspicuous box, with several of his choice friends close at hand, a basket of champagne being within easy reach. The wine flowed pretty freely, and, as the time for the hundred and fifty yard sprint approached, Stark was frequently heard offering to wager large sums on his son.

Roger Van Worth was not in appearance during the first of the evening, and Stark looked about in vain for him until less than twenty minutes before the hour for the race.

"I wonder where Van Worth and his Unknown are?" he cried in a loud tone. "I have him down for ten thousand dollars, and I'll win the money so easy it will make him tired of sporting."

"Don't be so sure of that," said a calm voice directly beneath the box, and Stark looked down to see Van

Worth standing there. "You are not going to have a walk-over, my friend. I know your boy can run a little, but my Unknown is a pretty good sprinter."

"He won't be in it at all," laughed the man in the box, who never once thought the Unknown could be Bart. "Walt was never in such trim in his life."

The time for the race finally arrived, and the runners appeared, coming from the dressing rooms. Walter Stark was the first to show himself, being dressed in flesh-colored tights, and really looking very graceful and formidable. He was greeted by a burst of applause, as he walked lightly down toward the starting point, and he smiled up at his father in a confident way, the elder Stark crying:

"That's my boy, and he's the lad who wins the sprint. I have plenty of cash that says so!"

The wine had loosened the man's tongue, and he was talking much more freely than was his custom.

The other starters followed young Stark down, one being an English lad named Burleigh, the second, a New Yorker named Hamp, who hoped to win second position, and the third, a French Canadian, who gave his name as Clukey.

Stark looked eagerly for Van Worth's Unknown, but that mysterious individual did not immediately show himself, whereupon the father of the champion amateur called to Roger:

"Where's your man? If he fails to start, the money is mine."

"He will not fail," was the retort. "Here he comes."

Down from the dressing rooms shambled a figure in black tights, and the companions of Cyrus Stark laughed outright as they observed his apparent awkwardness. Stark himself grinned, and then gave a start, staring hard at the lad in black.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed. "It is the boy from the West! Is it possible you have wagered your good money on him, Van Worth?"

"That is what I have done," nodded the man addressed. "He is something of a runner, you will find."

"He's awkward as a clown," broke out one of the men in the box. "Why, that fellow can't run!"

"Of course he can't!" chorused several others.

But Walter Stark himself knew better, and he was gazing at Bart with a feeling of dismay and consternation in his heart, for he remembered the race at Somerset Falls, when he had found it necessary to knock the Kansas lad down in order to outstrip him.

The elder Stark, however, knew nothing of this, and when he had recovered from his astonishment at the appearance of the awkward and slow-moving Western lad, he cried:

"That? Why, he won't be in it at all! If that's your Unknown, Van Worth, I'll go you two for one, for any sum, that he does not take first."

Walter Stark whirled around to warn his father, but the voice of the man challenged was distinctly heard to say:

"Very good, Stark; I will make it ten thousand dollars, outside the original bet, the entire sum to be posted immediately. Mr. Clay, at your side, shall be stake-holder. Here is my cash."

Stark was startled, and he paled a bit, saying:

"I do not believe I have so much at hand, Van Worth."

"That is all right," was the quiet assurance. "Just put your I O U against my dollars. A man of honor never refuses to acknowledge his own signature."

Stark could not have withdrawn then, if he had so desired, and he quickly wrote an I O U on a leaf torn

from his notebook, placing it in the hands of Clay, who already held Van Worth's money.

"This is like finding cash," he laughed, regaining his composure. "You must be eager to throw away your wealth, Van Worth."

But the man beneath the box had turned away, and did not appear to hear this remark.

Walter Stark set his teeth, a hard look coming to his face, as he muttered:

"That cow-puncher shall not beat me! I will win some way—by fair means or foul!"

"That's right, Walt," said a familiar voice, and Steinway, who had overheard the words which fell from the amateur's lips, appeared at Walter's side. "The lumbering chump can't beat you, anyway."

"You may think so, but I tell you he can run in an amazing fashion. I know, for I have raced with him. Can't stop to tell you about it now, but I confess I do not expect a walk-over."

Steinway looked somewhat alarmed, as he hastily exclaimed:

"You *must* win, old man! I have every dollar I could raise on you at odds, and it will put me in a bad hole if you lose. You must run as if it were for your life!"

"I shall, depend on that. If I lose—well, it will not be my fault."

It was to be a handicap sprint, Walter being relegated to the scratch, on account of his reputation. Three of the others were placed in various positions, according to their records, and the manner in which the handicapper had sized them up.

To the surprise of every one except Bart and his backer, the boy in black was placed at the scratch with Walter Stark.

Although the Kansas lad seemed muscular to a certain extent, the heaviness with which he carried himself and the sleepy look on his face, caused the spectators to wonder if he could really run at all.

"Oh, give him a show!" called Stark, with a coarse laugh. "He won't get started from that position before the race is finished."

"Don't worry about him," advised Roger Van Worth, who did not appear in the least anxious. "You are going to have a fair show for your money."

"Thanks; but I was thinking of you."

"If I lose, Mr. Clay has the cash ready for delivery. He will hand it over without delay."

Everybody within the huge rink was anxiously awaiting the coming race, for it was generally known by this time that Cyrus Stark had wagered thirty thousand dollars on his son, while Roger Van Worth, who was equally well known, had staked twenty thousand dollars that the boy in black would come in first.

Sympathy was with Walter Stark, beyond a doubt, for although in many ways he was not a popular lad, he spent his money freely, and that counted for a great deal with his class.

At length the call was made for positions, and the babel of voices quickly became hushed as the contestants assumed their places. Every eye was turned on them, and scores of stop-watches were in their owners' hands.

The handicapper moved along the line, making sure that everything was exactly as it should be, and then his voice rang out clearly:

"Get ready, gentlemen!"

Five shapely figures leaned far forward over the scratches, and the five runners held their breath for the word. And now a death-like silence had settled over

the great throng, while hundreds of hearts beat with increased rapidity.

The starter lifted his hand, a pistol gleaming in his fingers as he again called:

"One! Two! Three—*go!*"

At the word "go" the pistol spoke, and the contestants shot forward.

The race had begun.

CHAPTER XX.

THE RACE.

ON the instant, Walter Stark darted ahead like a grayhound, overtaking Burleigh, the Englishman, in a moment. At the first bound he seemed to leave the boy from the West slightly in the lurch, and it was plain to every one he had gained an early advantage over the lad in black.

Cyrus Stark laughed aloud as he exclaimed:

“What a fool Van Worth is! He ought to know better than to buck against me. Some men never learn their lesson.”

He was more than ever confident of winning, for he saw Walter was not yet doing his best, and he had already passed Burleigh, and was right at the shoulder of the French Canadian, while Hamp was barely holding the lead he had been given, although it was too hot a pace for him to keep up to the end.

Walter certainly looked very pretty and graceful as he soon dashed ahead of Clukey, and reached a position at the side of Hamp, whose face wore a desperate do-or-die look.

All this had taken place while the race was yet in its infancy, which caused young Stark's admirers to break into premature applause.

Where is the boy in black?

Walter asked himself that question, wondering if he had left Bart Stone at the start. Had he looked over

his shoulder he might have been spurred to another spurt by perceiving the Westerner had not lost a foot after the first bound, and was close behind Hamp, having also passed Burleigh and Clukey.

But what was the most astonishing was the fact that the Kansas lad did not seem to be doing his best by any means, for there was still the trace of a lope in his gait and a confident look on his face.

A large number of the spectators saw this, and the applause died away to a breathless silence again.

Then, just as Walter Stark was passing Hamp, the desperate runner stumbled and fell directly in the track of Bart Stone, while the amateur champion darted ahead—alone!

No, not alone!

If any one had doubted the Kansas lad's quickness and agility, their doubts were quickly put to flight, for, although Hamp dropped almost beneath his feet, Bart shot into the air and went flying over the unfortunate runner, scarcely losing an inch by the accident.

Clukey and Burleigh were not so fortunate. The French Canadian cleared Hamp, but lost his footing and went down, while the Englishman struck the first man to drop, and went whirling over him to land heavily on Clukey, which put all three of them out of the race in a moment, so far as any chance of winning first or second place was concerned.

This all took place inside the forty yards, leaving Walter Stark and the boy in black as the two principal contestants. Walter realized what had happened, but he did not dream Bart was so close until the Kansas lad appeared almost at his shoulder.

The spectators saw Walter gather himself and rush forward like the wind, but still the figure in black hung there at his shoulder.

Fifty—seventy-five—a hundred yards, and still Walter Stark was unable to gain an inch.

The pace had been a fearful one after the fall of Hamp, and the young amateur champion was feeling the effect of it. His breast was heaving tumultuously, but his teeth were set, and a sort of mad determination gleamed in his eyes.

It did not seem possible that the runners could hold out at such a speed to the end of the course, and still the Kansas boy was actually beginning to press Walter.

A perfect furnace of fury burned in Walter's heart. Could it be possible he was to lose this contest to the boy whom he had learned to hate with all the fierceness of his passionate nature? So furious was he at that moment that he would have readily chosen death in preference to defeat.

Still Bart was creeping up with increasing rapidity, threatening to take the lead inside the next twenty yards.

If he could hold his own five seconds longer, Walter knew he would come in the winner, and save his reputation and his father's money.

"I could kill that whelp!" was the thought within his heart as he plunged forward until a sort of haze came over his eyes and he was threatened with blindness.

Through this haze he saw Bart reach his side, and he knew the boy from the West would pass him in another second.

"I'll do it!"

Walter staggered a bit, and then, while still running, he swung out a foot, and tripped his opponent.

It was done with deliberate intent to fling the other boy forward on his face, but in this case it recoiled against the perpetrator of the dastardly trick.

Bart seemed to realize the crooked intention of his enemy, and although his foot was struck by that of Walter he was not overthrown.

On the contrary, the flying feet of the Westerner, who was now running with the grace and ease of an antelope, seemed to knock the legs from beneath young Stark in a twinkling, and Walter was flung heavily.

Bart nearly went down, but he recovered, and ran on, amid a wild uproar from the spectators.

Burleigh and Hamp were entirely out of the race, both being injured by their falls, but Clukey had held on persistently, and he now followed Bart into the end of the course, taking second place.

Then there was a wild rush of friends, and Walter Stark was surrounded by a score of sympathizers, as he dejectedly walked to the termination.

"Foul! foul!" shrieked a hundred voices, and scores of fists were shaken at the winner.

Stark's friends raised such an outcry that the voice of the referee could not be heard, but the sccrer chalked the decision on a huge blackboard, where all could see it, and the boy from the West was given the race in fifteen and one-half seconds, with Clukey second.

The third place was left vacant!

Then there was another terrible uproar, for it was plain to every one that Walter Stark had been thrown out by the referee.

The mob that had surged to the floor swayed and raved, hurling their threats at both the referee and the winner of the race. The latter, however stood breathing heavily, somewhat dazed, but triumphant, with Roger Van Worth and Joe Yates wringing his hands. He did not seem in the least disturbed by the threatening appearance of the spectators.

"Foul! foul!" again shouted Walter's friends and

those who had placed heavy money on him. "Stark was beaten by a foul!"

The young man's father had sunk back in his seat, his face pallid and his hands shaking. Twice he tried to speak to those near him, but failed, being able to summon no more than a ghastly smile to his face. Every one could see he was hard hit, not having dreamed it possible his son could be beaten.

At length the referee was able to make his voice heard, and from a raised stand he loudly called:

"The board shows my decision, gentlemen. Mr. Stark made the foul, as——"

Again the babel burst forth, but it was not as fierce or long continued as at first, soon dying away.

Then somebody up on the high seats was lifted to the shoulders of two friends, and shouted:

"Hurrah for the boy in black! He's a dandy!"

A scattering and rather faint cheer went up from various parts of the great building.

Under cover of the excitement, Yates and Mr. Van Worth attempted to hurry Bart to his dressing room, but they could not force a passage through the mob that blocked their way.

And now a hundred voices from the seats took up the cry:

"Unknown! Unknown! Where is Van Worth's Unknown? Who is he?"

"I'll tell you who he is!" screamed a reporter, who had obtained a position of prominence. "He is Bartley Stone, the boy from the West—the fellow who lassoed the panther and saved Ferda Van Worth! Three cheers for Bartley Seton!"

The result of the reporter's words were simply marvelous.

There was nothing weak or scattering about

the mighty cheer that followed. Everybody was on his feet, and hats and handkerchiefs were furiously waved, as the great throng literally thundered:

“Hurrah for the boy from the West! hurrah! *hurrah! hurrah!*”

CHAPTER XXI.

HOT AFTER STARK.

THE fickleness of great crowds is often astounding, and it was almost bewildering in this case to note the remarkable change that came over the spectators the moment the name of the boy who had defeated the heretofore petted Walter Stark was made known by the reporter.

The call for cheers for the "boy in black" had resulted in a wavering answer, but the announcement that the winner was the young Kansas cowboy who had roped the escaped panther was enough to bring a very tornado of applause from the great gathering.

The spectators were all intelligent, and but few of them had failed to read the lurid accounts of the way in which Bartley Stone roped the monarch of the forest just as the beast sprang for Ferda Van Worth. Not a few of them had felt they would be pleased to meet the plucky lad, anyway, and when they realized he was the person who had run the race as an "Unknown," and succeeded in defeating the pride of the Trojan Club, they gave their shouts to swell the uproar of admiration.

Round after round of cheers were given, the cries seeming to shake the very roof of the Rink.

As for Bart, he made a desperate effort to break through the crowd and reach the shelter of his dressing room, gasping:

"Wa-al, of all the crazy critters I ever saw! The whole herd acts like it was locoed."

But he could not escape thus easily, and he suddenly found himself lifted on the shoulders of several strong fellows, who bore him to the raised platform by the great blackboard.

"Here he is!" roared one chap, with iron lungs. "Take a look at him! He's a daisy!"

After another volley of applause, somebody raised the cry of "speech," which was taken up in all parts of the building.

Roger Van Worth had kept at Bart's side with great difficulty, but he was thrilled to the very soul with pride and delight.

"Hyar them galoots whoopin' for a speech!" gasped the Kansas lad, as he looked at his friend in a dazed way. "I just naturally can't say anything—and I *won't*"

He meant it, and all urging was vain; so, in order to quell the tumult, Mr. Van Worth stepped to the front of the platform, pulling his protégé forward and motioning for silence.

The cheering and cries died away, and Mr. Van Worth said, speaking loudly, so all could hear:

"Gentlemen, my young friend is quite unable to make a speech after running such a race, as you all should know, but he wishes me to express his thanks for your kind show of regard. That is all."

Then he whispered in Bart's ear, "Bow!—bow!" and the boy in black obeyed.

Again there were cheers, and then a voice was heard crying questioningly:

"Is he really the chap who lassoed the panther?"

"He is," assured Roger Van Worth. "He saved my daughter from a terrible death."

"Well, he's a corker!" returned the questioner. "Give him another round!"

Another round was given, and then Bart escaped from the platform and reached the seclusion of his dressing room, where Yates and two assistants rubbed him down, and Mr. Van Worth congratulated him on his victory.

"You will find yourself in all the papers again to-morrow morning," laughed the gentleman. "If this keeps up, you are on the high road to fame."

Bart's blood had been stirred by the reception given him when the crowd knew who he was, and a hot flush was in his face, while his sleepy eyes no longer wore a sleepy look. If ever a lad looked handsome, he did at that moment while the men were at work over his muscular body.

"Stark was giving me a right smart race," he confessed; "though I reckon I would have managed to take the lead at the finish. I saw his trick when he swung his foot, and I fooled the ornary varmint by upsetting him as he meant to me, though I near went down myself."

"You struck a heavy blow at Cyrus Stark, my lad. I do not know which he will feel the most keenly, the loss of his money or the defeat of his son."

"This is the beginning," came grimly from the Western lad's lips. "There is more to follow."

Mr. Van Worth left Yates to attend to Bart, while he went out to look for Stark; but Stark was not in his box, although Mr. Clay was there, looking all around in a searching manner. Roger made his way up to the box, and entered, finding it entirely deserted, save for Clay, who, hearing his step, turned.

"Ah!" exclaimed the stakeholder, recognizing the other man; "you are the person I was looking for."

"Mr. Stark——"

"Has gone. He instructed me to deliver the wager into your hands, which I will do before witnesses."

Clay then called up two young men whom he knew, after which he handed the money and the I O U over to the winner of the wager, saying:

"Mr. Stark directed me to tell you to call at his office any time to-morrow and receive a check for the amount of this paper."

"That is all right," smiled Mr. Van Worth easily. "With Mr. Stark's name attached, this is as good as his check."

Less than an hour later the millionaire and Bart were in the magnificent home of the former, where he was overwhelmed with congratulations from Ferda.

"I knew you would do it!" laughed the impulsive girl, her eyes like twin stars. "I did not have a doubt of it!"

"Wa-al, I thank you a heap for your confidence," rather awkwardly said the victor. "I kind of 'lowed I'd do it, but I wasn't noways sure."

"The entire winnings are yours," asserted Mr. Van Worth. "You earned them, and you deserve them—thirty thousand dollars in all."

To his astonishment Bart firmly shook his head, returning:

"I don't reckon I'll touch it, Mr. Van Worth. My mother always told me not to bet, and I do not believe she'd want me to take anything that was won by a bet."

"Nonsense! This is a free gift, then."

"I wouldn't take a free gift of thirty thousand dollars from any man, sir."

"But you ran against Walter Stark knowing my money was wagered on your head."

"Because I believed his father a villain who has done me a wrong that nothing can squar', sir. I did it to strike at him; for no other reason—none whatever."

"Well, you are the queerest boy I ever met!" cried the man, while the glow of admiration in Ferda's eyes deepened.

That night, before retiring to bed, Roger Van Worth unfolded another possible scheme for getting in a blow at Cyrus Stark.

The Denver, Texas and Fort Worth Railroad was contemplating extending a branch of its line across a tract of land in northern Texas, which land was owned by the Pan Handle Land Company. In case the railroad crossed the tract, its value would advance enormously, and it would be sought after by speculators. Already had Stark made a bid on chance, and the Land Company had agreed to consider any offer he should make, giving him first opportunity.

Roger Van Worth had means of knowing exactly what the railroad decided, and he would obtain the knowledge in advance of all others, so he proposed to use this information to defeat Stark in his ambition.

A meeting of the railroad directors and stockholders was to take place the coming day, and it was expected that by three o'clock in the afternoon the matter would be definitely settled.

With the object of reaching Stark again, Mr. Van Worth began work at an early hour in the morning, and by two o'clock in the afternoon the report had somehow got abroad that the railroad had decided on the extension. This rumor had originated from a few words which seemed to slip accidentally from Van Worth's lips, although he had not said a thing that could possibly be distorted or construed as a statement.

At exactly twenty minutes of three, Cyrus Stark entered the office of the Pan Handle Land Company on Nassau Street. The manager of the company, together with one or two prominent members, were present, and Stark was greeted with business-like formality.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, as soon as he was seated, "I have come to find out what you have to say to my proposal."

"I thought you understood we declined it, sir," returned Mr. Ratcliff, the manager. "I endeavored to make that plain the last time you were here."

"Well, I didn't know but you had changed your mind."

"Not much. In fact, we now hold the section at an advanced price."

It was evident the rumors had reached the Pan Handle Land Company, and Mr. Stark scowled a bit.

"Then you have determined on a price? Have you any objection to stating it?"

"I believe you asked the privilege of making an offer. We are ready to listen."

Without doubt, Mr. Ratcliff intended to take full advantage of the rumors in circulation.

"I am willing to take chances in this matter and make you an offer before the decision of the railroad is absolutely known," said Stark. "That is why I am here at this hour. I will give you ninety thousand dollars for a free and clear title to every foot of land the company owns in northern Texas."

"Hold on thar before you sell!" cried a boyish voice. "I'll go ten thousand dollars better—a hundred thousand dollars, spot cash, will I give for that yar land!"

The door had opened to admit the boy from the West, who was followed by Roger Van Worth.

CHAPTER XXII.

MATCHING WITS.

“FURIES!”

Cyrus Stark snarled out the word, as his eyes fell on the now thoroughly hated boy and the man behind him.

“How do you do, Stark,” greeted Mr. Van Worth, smoothly. “I trust we are not intruding?”

“Not at all, sir,” promptly assured Ratcliff, who knew and respected Roger, speaking before the discomfited Stark could utter a word. “You are quite welcome.”

“This is merely a little matter of business, and you know business can always wait,” said Stark, sarcastically.

“I inferred you were here on business, happening to hear your offer as we entered,” returned Mr. Van Worth, ignoring the real cut intended in the words of the other man. “My young friend here is a Westerner, and knowing something about the Texas Pan Handle, has taken a fancy to make an offer for the tract across which I hear the D., T. and F. W. is going to run.”

“Do you mean that this boy really makes an offer of one hundred thousand dollars in good faith?” asked the company’s manager, in evident doubt.

“Certainly, sir. I can vouch for him.”

Ratcliff drew a long breath and stared hard at Bart for a few moments, after which he turned to Stark, who was nervously pulling at his black beard and biting his lip.

"You have heard the boy's offer, Mr. Stark. Do you go any higher?"

The man addressed sprang up, as if to pace the office, but sat down as suddenly, replying:

"I don't know as I will."

"Then we are at liberty to negotiate with the boy?"

"Look here!" and Stark thumped the desk with his clinched fist, a black look on his face. "I want to know what kind of a sale you call this?"

"What kind of a sale?"

"Yes, sir; is it an auction?"

Ratcliff's face cleared, and he half-smiled, as he coolly replied:

"We have no objections to selling our land at private auction, if that is what you want, Mr. Stark."

"Confound it! It's not what I want! It is no way of doing business! If you don't know what is right and proper——"

"Stop right there!" the manager broke in, rather warmly. "If you pause to consider, you will realize you are going too far, Mr. Stark. You are letting your excitement get the best of you, and you will be saying something you'll regret."

The man addressed was checked, and he sat still, silent for awhile, as he surveyed Bart Stone from head to feet, finally observing:

"You seem destined to cause me no end of trouble, young man. It strikes me you are running a bluff here. If so, I propose to call you. Mr. Ratcliff, will you kindly draw up a written statement that one hundred thousand dollars is offered, and see that this upstart stripling signs it, with Roger Van Worth's name also attached as a sponsor?"

"What's the use of that yar trouble, as long as I propose to pan out spot cash?" asked Bart.

After some moments' discussion, Ratcliff asked Roger Van Worth:

"Will you back this boy in any offer he may make?"

"Most assuredly, sir," was the prompt reply. "I am here for that purpose."

"That is quite enough," nodded the manager. "If you secure the land, Mr. Stark, you will have to outbid the young man."

Stark ground his teeth, his heart full of rage, but he spoke hurriedly when he had glanced at his watch:

"All right. I'll give one hundred and ten thousand dollars. Let him go over that if he dares!"

"Wa-al, I'll give one hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars, I reckon," calmly drawled Bart.

"One hundred and thirty!"

"One hundred and thirty-five."

Stark's hand was not very steady, as he took out a pocket check-book and hastily wrote in it.

"There!" he cried; "this draft is all filled out except putting in the figures, and I propose to stay right here and bid till I get this piece of land. When I write a draft it shows I mean business. I'll give a hundred and forty thousand dollars!"

Roger Van Worth had taken a position at the door, which was now open, where he could command a view of the interior of the office, the elevator and the stairs. He did not seem to be greatly interested in the bidding for he watched the stairs and the elevator more than he did Stark and the boy from Kansas.

Bart had chosen a position near Ratcliff's desk, leaning easily on the back of a chair, his wide-brimmed hat in his hand. Barely had the last words fallen from Stark's lips, when he said:

"I will make it an even hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

"One hundred and sixty!" almost shouted Stark, his voice shaking perceptibly.

"One hundred and seventy-five thousand."

Again Stark's temper gained control of him, and he leaped to his feet, sneering:

"What a wretched farce! I tell you there is nothing in it! This boy will never make good his bids! How can he?"

"We have the assurance of Mr. Van Worth, which we consider quite enough," said the manager.

"Confound it, Van Worth, what do you mean by playing this game against me?"

Roger lifted his eyebrows, making a gesture of protest with his right hand.

"You are excited, Stark—that is evident. You are talking about games as if you never indulged in anything of the kind. That boy is the son of my old schoolmate, and anything I have is not too rich for him."

"But do you intend to let him throw away your money? How dare you permit him to sink such a sum in this tract of land? Why, it would be a sheer loss if the railroad did not cross it!"

"Have you thought of that yourself? It is plain you have heard the reports already in circulation, but you ought to know, I am generally around to catch on to such things."

"Then it is *you* who is really buying this land? Why not come out squarely, instead of doing it through a stupid boy?"

"The stupid boy, as you call him, has already won me thirty thousand dollars of your money. Perhaps I consider him a mascot."

Like a flash, Stark wheeled back to his chair, saying hoarsely:

"If you get this land you'll pay dear for it! I am going to fill out this check, and offer it to Mr. Ratcliff. It is my limit."

In a moment he had written in the sum and torn the slip of paper from the book, handing it to the manager of the Pan Handle Land Company.

"How much is his offer?" quietly asked the boy from the West.

"Two hundred thousand dollars," replied Mr. Ratcliff.

"If I don't go more, I reckon you'll accept that?"

"I shall."

At this moment, Roger Van Worth started and coughed in a singular manner, leaving the door to walk into the office.

"Wa-al," drawled Bart, deliberately, "I 'low Mr. Stark'll have to corral the land. I'm done bidding."

"Ha! ha!" laughed the triumphant purchaser. "Your nerve failed you at last."

At this point a messenger boy entered the office.

"Is Mr. Stark here—Mr. Cyrus Stark?" he asked.

"Right here," replied the man, as he caught the envelope and quickly tore it open, his eyes running over the brief note at a glance.

He turned pale as a corpse, and with a gasping cry, sank helplessly back in the chair, the paper fluttering to the floor.

CHAPTER XXIII.

STARK SQUIRMS.

THESE were the words which Cyrus Stark had read, hastily scrawled in the, to him, familiar handwriting of his trusted attorney:

“Street rumors false. Make no deal. D., L. and F. W. decided against the extension across the Pan Handle Land Company’s grant. HEEP.”

At first Stark’s face was ghastly white, and he seemed on the verge of fainting; then there came a rush of blood that turned his features crimson, and from crimson to purple. His eyes stared, and he clawed convulsively at his throat.

Ratcliff, still holding the draft in his hands, started to his feet in alarm, exclaiming:

“The man is having a stroke of apoplexy!”

The other gentlemen were on their feet in a moment, some one crying:

“Call a physician!”

The agitated man, however, tore open his collar and motioned for them to sit down.

“Water!” he finally gasped.

A glass of water was quickly brought, and, after a few swallows, Stark’s face slowly assumed its proper color, and he began to appear natural.

There was no look of triumph on the face of the boy from the West, nor did he seem in the least alarmed by

Stark's manner. Stooping, he picked up the message and placed it on the desk at the man's elbow.

Roger Van Worth displayed a certain amount of solicitude for Stark, but was not greatly excited, although he seemed relieved when the schemer recovered.

Ratcliff sank back in his chair, but the other gentlemen remained standing.

The messenger was waiting for Stark to sign, which was soon attended to, and then he took his departure.

"It is apparent you have received bad news," observed Roger Van Worth, in his quiet way. "Nothing serious, I trust?"

Those words cut Cyrus Stark like blows from a whip, and he sprang unsteadily to his feet, shaking his fist at the speaker, as he almost screamed:

"You hypocrite! I believe you knew it all the time! I see through your trick now!"

Mr. Van Worth raised his eyebrows, and looked mildly astonished.

"Is the man crazy?" he exclaimed. "What can be possibly mean by such language?"

"You know what I mean!" stormed the excited speculator. "You were aware the railroad had decided against the extension! It was a deliberate plot to draw me into this trap!"

Then he whirled on the manager of the land company, snarling:

"It's a fraud. How much did you have to pay this man and boy to work me into this rascally scheme? Oh, I see through it all!"

Ratcliff's face was pale, but he replied, severely:

"Sir, you are using unpardonable language! I thought you considered yourself a gentleman! You owe us an apology!"

Even this did not recall Cyrus Stark to his senses,

for he raved up and down the office like a madman, uttering words that would not look well in print. His fury spent itself after a time, however, and he flung himself down in the chair, panting and glaring at Roger Van Worth and Bart.

The manager of the land company turned to one of the other gentlemen, saying:

"Leland, will you kindly call in Mr. Smith. The papers shall be drawn up immediately and the transfer made to Mr. Stark."

"Hold on!" entreated the baffled schemer. "Let's talk this matter over."

"I see no reason for making further talk," said Ratcliff. "I have your draft, and have accepted your offer. That settles it."

"I suppose I have been hasty in my language," confessed Stark, with sudden humbleness; "but this is enough to break any man's nerve. If I have said anything out of the way to you, Mr. Ratcliff, I apologize."

Although this was said in a conciliatory manner, it was also intended as a roundabout thrust at Roger Van Worth; but if Stark expected that gentleman to show he felt it, he must have been disappointed.

"All right, all right," nodded the manager. "I accept the apology, Mr. Stark. Now we will have Mr. Smith called before he leaves his office for the afternoon. This matter may as well be settled at once."

"Don't be in such a hurry. How much will you take to call the bargain off?"

Something like a cutting laugh came from Roger Van Worth's lips; but as he was talking in a low tone to Bart, and did not seem to be heeding what was passing in the office, it was barely possible he had not thought of a return thrust at Stark.

However, Cyrus turned a severe glare on the man and boy, both of whom he now hated with undying intensity.

"It is a fair and square deal," said Ratcliff. "I hold your draft for two hundred thousand dollars, and I see no reason why there should be a withdrawal now."

"I may make it worth while for you to withdraw."

"I think not."

"But you do not know," desperately insisted the schemer, who had quite lost his head, or he would have asked that Roger and Bart be requested to withdraw. In his eagerness to get out of the trap into which he had leaped, he was humbling himself still further in their presence.

Ratcliff lifted his hand to his mouth, but when he removed it, his face was perfectly grave.

"For what sum will you call the bargain off and return me that draft?" anxiously asked Stark.

"One hundred thousand dollars," was the staggering reply.

Stark looked as if he had received a blow in the face.

"Sir!" he gasped; "this is astonishing! Do you mean to say you have beaten me to the extent of one hundred thousand dollars in this matter?"

"We do not mean to say anything about it," was the cool reply.

"But your words mean as much! It is a fraud—a swindle! I will have satisfaction!"

He was getting excited and violent again.

"Mr. Stark," spoke Ratcliff, severely, "you will kindly remember we simply accepted your own offer—nothing more. You are again using language that is unpardonable."

"I will give you ten thousand dollars to return that

draft and cancel the bargain!" burst from the insnared schemer's lips. "I will write the draft at once."

"You have heard our figures."

"But it is outrageous! I will not submit to such a fraud! I protest!"

"Mr. Leland," once more said the manager of the land company, "call in Mr. Smith."

Leland started for the door.

"I will make it twenty-five thousand dollars!" panted Stark. "You can't refuse that!"

"But we do, just the same. You have made a fair trade, Mr. Stark; why not stand by it? You should know it is useless to kick in such a matter."

"I'll not accept any papers! I'll stop payment on that draft!"

This brought the matter to a culmination, for Ratcliff arose to his feet, his face like a stone, and his voice hard as the ring of steel.

"If you stop payment we shall have to bring suit, sir!"

"Bring it, and be—hanged!"

"You will not think of such a measure?"

"Won't I? Well, you'll see! The bank is closed for the day now; and I'll take good care you do not draw your money to-morrow. I mean it!"

"You must be out of your senses! If you do such a thing, the Pan Handle Land Company will promptly bring suit against you, and we will win the case."

With the aid of his chair Stark slowly arose to his feet, a look of despair in his eyes.

"Man, you will ruin me!" he half-groaned.

"Impossible! A man of your standing cannot be ruined by the purchase of a tract of land at two hundred thousand dollars! Now you are joking!"

"You do not know all that has happened of late——" Stark began, only to break off abruptly, as he evidently realized what he was saying.

With a great effort, he assumed a shadow of his usual haughty air, turning on Roger Van Worth.

"Sir," he said, "you have beaten me in this matter, but I promise to even things up some day."

A sudden change came over the usually quiet gentleman, and he started forward, his face black as a storm-cloud.

"I wish to hear no more of your threats, Stark!" came crushingly from Roger's lips. "You have insulted both myself and my young friend, but I do not expect an apology from such a man as you. However"—suddenly producing a slip of paper and waving it before the other's eyes—"I do expect the cash for this acknowledgment of a debt, to which your name is signed."

It was the I. O. U. for the sum of twenty thousand dollars.

At first it seemed that Stark would give way to another outbreak, but he restrained himself, saying, with something like his usual manner:

"I instructed Mr. Clay to tell you to call at the office for your money. You did not call."

"No."

"Well, I am not in the habit of carrying around that amount of cold cash with me."

"Then give me your draft for it."

But a moment did Stark hesitate, and then he sat down and wrote the draft, as requested, passing it to Mr. Van Worth, who bowed and smiled with all his accustomed suavity.

"Thank you, Stark. This ends our dealings with each other—for the present."

"I trust so," was the retort, as Stark refused to recognize the significance of the final words.

"Good-day, gentlemen. Good-day, Stark."

The trapped schemer made no answer, but turned his back squarely on Mr. Van Worth, who, smiling quietly, left the office, Bart following.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AFTER BUCK PRINDLE.

THE man and boy entered a cab that had been waiting for them at the curb below.

For some moments after the cab started to roll northward, neither spoke. Mr. Van Worth was the first to break the silence, and he turned to Bart, saying:

"We have made a good beginning. If we can keep this up, you will soon see Cyrus Stark crushed, and I suppose that is what you want?"

"I want to hear him confess—I want to win back the property that rightfully belongs to my mother. I feel a desire to avenge my poor father!"

"And you are not to blame. I am with you, and something seems to tell me we will win this fight. You saw how badly broken up Stark was. Well, he has been losing heavily on the street of late, and he hoped to set himself on his feet by this deal that has gone against him. How he hates us both!"

"I'd rather have his hatred than his love, a heap sight. I never in all my life felt I'd like to hurt any human critter till I knew how he had injured mother. Then I wanted to get back that yar mine, but I reckon I'd been content at that if I hadn't heard the words of Buck Prindle. They 'roused a suspicion that father was dealt with foully, and now I'll never let up till I have follered the trail plumb through to the end."

The boy's manner showed how much in earnest he

really was, for he was grave and more like a man than a lad of seventeen.

"Buck Prindle is the man we must get hold of," nodded Mr. Van Worth. "He must tell what he knows."

"It may not be an easy thing to make that thar galoot tell anything."

"Why?"

"Wa-al, I kind of suspect he's mixed some way so he'll be afraid to talk."

"By Jove! I believe you are right. If not, why hasn't he talked before?"

"That's it."

"Then, when my detectives find him, he shall be forced to confess."

"When your detectives find him?"

"Yes; I have had two men on the search for him since you told Stark you intended to send men out to recover the stock."

This was news for Bart, but he immediately appreciated the wisdom of the gentleman's course.

Mr. Van Worth went on to say one of the detectives had tracked Prindle to a low joint in Brooklyn, and there the trail had ended as completely as if the man had dissolved into thin air. Still, the ferret was working on the other side of the East River, hopeful of soon bringing information of further success.

Little did the man and boy dream how soon such information would be received. When they reached Mr. Van Worth's Madison Avenue home, the detective was found waiting there.

"What news?" eagerly asked the millionaire, as, with Bart, he appeared in the library, where Carrol, the detective, was waiting.

The detective looked inquiringly at Bart.

"He's all right," assured Roger, understanding the meaning of that glance. "He is the boy I am pushing this matter for. You may talk before him freely. Have you found any trace of Prindle?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Ha! That is interesting. What's the result?"

"I have found Prindle himself."

"Good! Where?"

"Out on Long Island."

"Indeed! What is he staying over there for?"

"Because he can't get away."

Mr. Van Worth lifted his eyebrows as he heard this singular reply, staring hard at the detective.

"Eh?" he exclaimed. "I don't understand you. Why can't he get away?"

"He is a prisoner," was the still more surprising answer.

"A prisoner?"

"Exactly, sir."

"Great Scott! What has he been doing to get himself arrested?"

"He has not been arrested."

Roger gazed at the detective as if he could scarcely credit the evidence of his ears.

"You are puzzling me very much, Carrol," was his deliberate assertion, after a moment of silence. How can he be a prisoner if he has not been arrested?"

"He has been made a prisoner by private parties, not by officers, sir."

Bart was listening with eager interest, having twice opened his lips to say something and then closed them again, trusting all to the older man.

"By private parties?" burst from Mr. Van Worth's lips, as he began to suspect the truth. "Who?"

"Cyrus Stark."

"I knew it!" nodded Bart, unable to keep silent longer. "I reckoned as much the minute he said Prindle had been corraled. If this yere don't prove thar's something in what that critter said about Stark having a hand in my father's death, I don't know shucks!"

Roger was also greatly aroused, and he cried:

"Tell us all about it, Carrol—lively!"

"There is not much to tell. I have found Stark put private detectives after the man, in order to recover the missing stock, and Prindle was nailed in the Ivy Green, over in Brooklyn. There the detectives got in with him and managed to get a drugged drink down his throat, with the result that when Mr. Buck Prindle awoke he found himself comfortably and closely confined in a cellar, with a tough character standing guard over him."

"Where is the cellar?"

"Know Jarley's old abandoned road house—the place they say is haunted?"

"Yes."

"The cellar is under that house."

"Did Stark get the stock?"

"I don't know; I suppose so."

Roger Van Werth was silent some moments, walking swiftly up and down the library. Finally, he halted, wheeling toward the detective and the expectant boy.

"Buck Prindle is the man we want above everybody and everything else," he declared. "If we do not get him soon, Stark is liable to spirit him out of the country."

"Wa-al, I reckon we can get him this yar night!" cried the Kansas lad.

"How?"

"Go and take him. This yere detective says thar

ain't but one man on guard, and thar are three of us. We ought to be a heap plenty for one."

"That's right! It is just the kind of talk I like to hear. What do you say to it, Carrol?"

"I am in you employ, sir, and with you as far as the law will allow," was the answer of the adventurous detective. "This man is held prisoner against his will by those who have no right to do so, and it is proper we should release him."

That settled it. Without delay, Mr. Van Worth ordered a lunch prepared for them all, and instructed one of the servants to bring his revolvers to the library. The lunch and the revolvers were forthcoming at the same time.

"Can you shoot, Bart?" asked the gentleman.

The boy from the West smiled.

"Wa-al, a little," was his modest reply. "I heard as how people didn't tote around guns in this yar part of the country none whatever, so I left mine at home."

"Take one of these. Carrol is armed."

The lunch was soon dispatched, and the party started on its way, crossing to Brooklyn by the Twenty-third Street ferry.

A team of high-stepping horses was obtained, and, with Carrol handling the reins, they reached the country as twilight came creeping down. On into the gathering night the spirited horses bore them, the beat of their iron hoofs making a rhythmical ring, with now and then the flash of a spark from the stones, like the glinting glow of a firefly.

For nearly an hour this steadily continued, and then Roger Van Worth spoke in a low tone to the boy at his side.

"Ready for business, my lad. Jarley's road house is not far away. There may be hot work on hand."

CHAPTER XXV.

AT THE OLD ROAD HOUSE.

IN the western sky there were no stars, for a great bank of clouds lay there, and an occasional sullen muttering told that a storm was threatening.

Somehow there was something like a smell of sulphur in the soft country breeze; but that was far preferable to the smell of bricks and stones that actually seemed to pervade the city at the close of sweltering days.

Bart felt his blood stir as he listened to Mr. Van Worth's words, and his hand went around to his hip, to make sure the revolver was there.

But his nerves were steady, for the excitement of the round-up and an occasional stampede had taught him to look on danger as something to be constantly faced in life, and he now considered himself prepared for whatever adventure might follow.

All at once the detective drew in the horse and turned into a sort of lane, driving a little distance from the main road and stopping.

"We had better leave the team here and approach the house on foot," he said. "In that way, we will not give the alarm, and may be able to come down on the guard, and take him by surprise. If we do that, the fellow may not make any resistance."

The horses were hitched, and then they hurried down the road, with Carrol in the lead, stealing like grim specters through the gloom.

The old road house had been located in an out-of-the-

way place, and it had never borne anything but a most shady reputation. Jarley's wife had died there under "suspicious circumstances," and Jarley himself soon closed up the place and vanished, going none knew whither. Then the report was set in circulation that the old house was haunted by the ghost of Jarley's wife, and an effort to open it and restore its lost popularity with a certain class had proved a failure.

Not long after leaving the carriage the trio saw the outlines of the old house looming blackly before them. All was silent and dismal about the place, which really seemed to have a ghostly aspect.

The three crept up cautiously, following the line of the fence and crouching low, so they might escape the observation of any one on the watch. From the fence they darted across a patch of tangled grass and reached the house, making no sound to raise an alarm.

They had not been challenged, and a death-like stillness seemed to brood about the place, as if it were entirely deserted. At the back of the house was a piece of marshy woods, from which came the mournful peeping wail of a tree-toad, and, for some reason, the surroundings and this dreary sound caused a strange sensation to creep over Bart—not a sensation of fear, but a sort of shuddery chilliness.

"This way," whispered the detective, as he led them toward the back entrance. "There is a window out here that I can open."

But when they reached the back door they found it standing wide, creaking a bit on its rusty hinges, as an occasional breath of wind swept around the corner.

The three halted abruptly and stared toward each other through the darkness, evidently trying to read the thoughts of their companions. If such was their desire, they were baffled by the deep gloom.

A faint flash of lightning blazed a single instant in the western sky, showing Bart the expression of surprise and consternation on the faces of the two men. The lightning faded, but not until the thunder had muttered in a faint and grumbling manner and died away to silence, did one of the three venture any expression. Then Roger Van Worth asked:

“What does it mean?”

“Give it up,” whispered Carrol. “Perhaps Stark’s guard has stepped out and left the door open until he returns.”

“What had we better do—wait for him, and make him our prisoner when he appears, or go into the house and look for Prindle?”

The question was open for discussion, but Bart did not venture to express himself until his opinion was asked.

“Wa-al,” he whispered, with his usual deliberation, “I reckon it’s best to go in and find out just how the land lays. Maybe we can get Prindle out before the guard shows up. If so, what’s the need of having a racket with the guard, anyway?”

There was wisdom in this, and it was soon decided that they should all enter the house and make sure the guard was not there. Then Carrol could go into the cellar and release the captive, while Mr. Van Worth and Bart watched for the return of the guard.

They were pretty well prepared for whatever might happen, as they cautiously crept into the house, having their weapons in hand for quick use in case of need.

The detective had brought a dark lantern, and he opened the slide as soon as they were fairly inside. This enabled them to find their way about without making any more noise than was absolutely necessary.

To the surprise of the detective, the apparently awk-

ward lad made less noise than either of the others, moving with an ease and caution that was simply remarkable.

The old road house seemed entirely deserted. When they had reached one of the main rooms, they paused and listened. The only sound to be heard was the fitful clapping of a loose board that was disturbed by the gusty wind that seemed to come out of the night at intervals. The sound was uncanny and awe-inspiring, like the dropping of clods on a coffin, and Bart shook himself together with a shiver.

Had either of the trio believed in ghosts, there was an air about the place that would have convinced them it was haunted; but it happened they were skeptics in fact as well as in statement.

"Stay right here until I go down into the cellar," whispered Carrol quietly. "If the guard comes, jump on him, and I will be with you the moment I hear the racket."

"All right," replied both the man and the boy. "Go ahead."

The detective seemed to understand the arrangement of the old house, for he soon found the door that led to the cellar stairs. He left it standing wide open, descending by the aid of his lantern.

Soon the light disappeared, and the man and boy were left alone.

For some reason, neither ventured to whisper a word, although both felt a strong desire to say something. They remained silent, listening for any sound from the cellar or the footstep of the returning guard.

Within a few moments they heard a low cry of evident dismay from Carrol, and directly after he came hurrying incautiously up the stairs, crying:

"He's gone!"

The words rang hollowly through the old house, awaking strange echoes that seemed like scornful laughter—or would have seemed so to a superstitious person.

“Gone?” gasped Mr. Van Worth and Bart in a breath.

“Yes,” was the answer. “He was confined in the cemented storeroom, but the door of that is open, and he is not there.”

“What does it mean?” cried Roger.

“It means trouble—work—a hot hunt.”

“Then you think—just what?”

“I think it likely that he has been removed to some other place. Possibly he has agreed to leave the country, and that is how he has escaped from the cellar.”

“Hark!”

The word came from Bart’s lips as he caught the speaker by the arm.

They all listened, and the sound of carriage wheels was heard. The carriage left the road and came to the front door of the house, where it stopped a moment, then it moved again, rolling around to the back door to make a final halt there.

“Someboy’s coming!” sibilated Bart. “Hunt cover right lively, pards!”

“Listen!” admonished Roger Van Worth.

They were silent, distinctly hearing the voices of two persons.

“It is Cyrus Stark!” softly exclaimed Roger.

“And t’other critter’s his son Walt, or I don’t know a jack rabbit from a jack mule!” declared the boy from the West.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BAFFLED RASCALS.

WHAT had brought Cyrus Stark and his son to the deserted road house at that hour?

That was the question that flashed through the mind of the trio who heard the voices of the man and boy at the back door.

If Buck Prindle had been removed from the place at the instigation or direction of Stark, something of a remarkable nature must have happened to induce the man and boy to visit that lonely spot under cover of darkness.

The man and boy could be heard talking in subdued tones, and it was evident that they were securing their team before coming into the house.

"To cover!" once more whispered the Kansas lad. "Them galoots 'll be coming in this yere way right soon."

The detective flashed the light of his lantern around the room, revealing a door that was standing open on the long hallway that led to the front of the house.

"In there!" he whispered. "If they come, we will be prepared to receive them."

Roger Van Worth hurried noiselessly across to the door and into the hall, Bart at his heels, with the detective following close. Carrol swung the door until it was only open on a crack, at which he listened.

It was not long before the two Starks were heard entering by the back door, breaking the awesome silence

of the lonely house by their loud voices, and stamping heavily with their feet.

"Where can that worthless whelp be?" stormed Cyrus. "The idea of leaving the back door wide open! Ten to one he's drunk again!"

"I won't go you on that, governor," Walter was heard to say, at the same time forcing a laugh, as if he did not feel very comfortable. "He is surely drunk if he has been able to get anything to drink of an intoxicating nature. He's a guzzler."

"Bob! Bob!" called the man. His voice awoke the echoes of the empty rooms, and Walter was heard to gasp:

"Great Scott! Hear that! Let's get out of here as soon as possible, old man! I don't fancy the place."

"Don't be a fool!" harshly returned Stark. "There's nothing here to harm a kitten. Where is that miserable Bob?"

"Perhaps he has skipped, pop."

"Skipped?"

"Yes—flew the coop."

The Starks had brought no light with them, but at this point the man struck a match. It flared up, and they saw the cellar door standing wide open, just as the detective had left it when he came hurriedly up the stairs.

"He must be down there," said Cyrus; but there was a strangely excited ring to his voice, mingled with a quaver of doubt.

"Go you odds he isn't, pop," came quickly from the boy's lips.

"Oh, dry up! Come on, and we will soon find out."

"Come on where?"

"Into the cellar."

"Not on your life, pop."

"What do you mean? What is the matter with you?"

"Think I'd go down in that cellar without a light? Not much! That kind of a thing lets me out!"

"What are you afraid of, you young fool?"

"Nothing in the world, pop. I simply decline to go down there and take my chances of falling and breaking my neck. See?"

"There must be a lamp about the place."

Several moments passed, and then another match was lighted. An exclamation of satisfaction broke from Stark's lips as soon as he held the light above his head and looked around the room, for on a high shelf he espied a lamp. This was soon brought down and lighted, whereupon the man promptly started for the cellar, saying:

"Come."

"No, you will have to excuse me," said Walter; "I am not feeling like taking so much exercise."

"All right; stay here in the dark!" snarled Stark, as he began to descend the stairs.

Of a sudden Walter changed his mind and hurried after his father, the precious pair descending together.

Not a word was heard to come from their lips until presently a hoarse, harsh cry rang through the cellar and floated up the stairs. It was a cry of mingled fury and despair, and it was followed by the sound of excited voices.

The rascally father and son had discovered the captive was gone.

Almost immediately they were heard rushing madly up the stairs, uttering excited exclamations as they came.

Up into the room they dashed, the man still ahead, the lamp grasped in his shaking hand.

"Gone!" he was saying wildly; "gone, and I am a ruined man. Oh, such beastly, infernal luck! We should have tortured the whelp into telling where he had concealed the stolen stock, instead of trying to starve him to that point. Then— Blazes!"

This final exclamation, with which he interrupted himself, was caused by the sight of a person who sat astride an old chair that had been planted squarely in the center of the room. This person was resting his elbows on the back of the chair, with his chin comfortably planted on his hands, while he stared at the astounded man and boy in the coolest manner imaginable.

It was Bart Stone, the boy from the West.

For some moments the Starks were too astounded to utter a sound, staring at the lad on the chair as if he were an apparition. Walter was the first to regain his composure, and he gasped:

"Great Jupiter! Where did it come from?"

The words seemed to arouse Cyrus Stark, for he grated his teeth, a wicked light in his eyes:

"That miserable boy again! He is my evil genius! He will ruin me yet!"

"An eye for an eye is the old Bible law, Mr. Cyrus Stark!" came grimly from Bart Stone's lips. "My father does not rest easy in his grave, and he never will until the ornary skunk that killed him is rounded up as he deserves."

"What do you mean by saying that to me, you young dog?" almost howled the man, suddenly making a step forward. "You want to have a care, or I'll——"

"What?" Bart put the question with aggravating coolness, a smile of contempt on his face.

"Well, you'll go to keep your worthless father company!" returned the villain, utterly thrown off his

guard. "I always hated the man after he refused to take me in as a full partner on the White Horse lead, and so——"

He broke off abruptly, fully aware he had already said more than was prudent.

"Oh, don't stop thar!" cried the young cowboy, all the sleepy look gone from his eyes. "Go on, Mr. Cyrus Stark; go on! Make a full confession."

"Confession! You are crazy! I'm making no confession."

"Wa-al, if it wasn't mighty nigh it I don't know shucks," nodded Bart. "You had a grudge against my father, and you wanted to get hold of the mine. Motive enough for the crime, I reckon."

"Do you dare accuse me—do you dare?" fumed Stark. "You fool! I will——"

"Stop right thar! It an't healthy to get too near me!"

The boy from the West lowered one hand to point a finger straight at Cyrus Stark, which halted the man as quickly as if it had been a deadly weapon.

"Lo you threaten?" he cried. "What have you done with Prindle? Where is that stock?"

"What stock?"

"The shares of the White Horse Mine."

"Really, pard, you ought to know. It was not many days ago I heard you say as how you had it right fast. I don't reckon as you're a galoot as can tell a lie!"

"You've got that stock—I know it—I can see it in your manner!" burst from Stark's lips. "You shall give it up! I'll force you to do so!"

"You may find that a right hard thing to do, pard. I can sometimes be coaxed, but I'm worse 'n a donkey to drive."

"We won't spend any time in coaxing you, my game chicken! You will find you monkeyed with the wrong man when you tackled Cyrus Stark."

"That's the stuff, governor!" put in Walter. "He's worked it some way to set Prindle loose and get the certificates. But he'll never get out of this house till he tells where they are!"

Bart actually laughed aloud at this threat.

"How are you going to stop me?" he asked.

Walter suddenly produced a revolver and leveled it at the head of the boy on the chair.

"With this!" he cried.

And still the Kansas lad did not seem at all alarmed.

"Is she loaded?" he drawled. "'Cause if she is, you want to look out she don't go off and hurt you."

"Ready, pop," said the lad with the revolver. "Jump on him, while I keep him under the gun!"

The rascally father and son moved toward Bart, who remained calmly seated in the chair, observing:

"You're just a little slow, my festive galoots. If you'll take the trouble to cast your lookers over yon toward that thar door, you'll see a brace of my friends as holds the drop on you, and holds it *bad*. They can shoot some, and when the fun begins, you won't be in it, none whatever."

"We are right here," spoke the voice of Roger Van Worth, causing the trapped scoundrels to whirl about in consternation.

Stark uttered an exclamation of great fury and concern as he saw Mr. Van Worth and the detective standing in the now open doorway, cocked revolvers in their hands.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A NIGHT OF DESPERATE DEEDS.

"It is a trap!" gasped Walter in dismay. "They've been laying for us, pop."

The greatest fury was expressed by the face of the cornered rascal, and he snarled:

"Satan take them all! They can't throw me down!"

"Wa-al, you two don't seem to be jumping me as much as you were," drawled Bart.

"What brings you here, Van Worth?" demanded Stark. "What business have you in this house?"

"Thought I would come down here and see how your captive was getting along, don't you know," was the reply. "It would scarcely do to allow Mr. Stone to come down here alone, as there was a chance he might fall into bad company."

Stark's face wore a look of the most intense hatred, but he endeavored to speak with something like coolness, as he asked:

"What have I ever done to you, Van Worth, that you should persistently hound me?"

"Do you remember the great safe vault scheme in which I sunk the slick little sum of seventy thousand dollars all through your misrepresentations?"

Stark winced.

"I remember," he confessed, "that I made an error of judgment. But surely you have squared that with me by this time? You beat me out of thirty thousand



“ Sent the lariat whirling and made the cast.”

(See page 78)

at the Rink, and with this miserable boy, lured me into giving at least one hundred thousand dollars to the Pan Handle Land Company as a present. What more do you want?"

"I want to know exactly how my old schoolmate, Norman Stone, came to his death," was the stern reply, causing Cyrus to turn still paler.

"He came to his death in his own mine by a blast that was fired by one of his own men."

Roger Van Worth's face wore a look of incredulity.

"That may be true, Stark; but there are ugly rumors afloat about it. You are the man who knows the whole truth."

"No matter what I told you, you would not believe me."

"That's right, governor," put in Walter. "Don't let those chaps give you the bluff!"

This seemed to start the man's blood, for he suddenly grew enraged, crying furiously:

"Draw revolvers on me, will you! Do you think to cow me that way? I am not afraid of your bullets."

Then, with a swift motion, he whirled and flung the lighted lamp fairly at Bart Stone's head.

The boy from the West ducked just in time to avoid the missile, which crashed against the wall, flinging a flood of blazing oil over that side of the room.

In a moment Jarley's old road house was on fire, doomed to destruction.

Bart leaped away to avoid the burning oil, colliding with Walter Stark. He grappled the son of his enemy, just as Cyrus Stark, shouting fire, leaped with a crash fairly through a window out into the night.

"Stop the old hawse!" cried the Kansas lad. "I can take care of this one."

The detective and Roger Van Worth followed Stark

through the window, while a terrific struggle took place between the two boys, who were left alone in the burning building.

"This time it is you or I, and one of us won't go out!" came fiercely from young Stark's lips.

"Then I reckon you'll stay," returned Bart. "But I——"

He never finished the sentence, for at that moment Walter, who was exerting himself to the utmost, suddenly succeeded in casting him against the chair, over which Bart fell backward, his athletic young foe adding his weight to the force of the fall.

It was the unexpected that overthrew the young cowboy, for he had not been on his guard against the chair, and the back of his head struck the floor with terrible force, fairly stunning him.

"Knocked out!" panted Walter exultantly. "This is my turn. Let him get out of this house the best way he can."

Then, as the fire was spreading rapidly, the young villain left Bart where he had fallen, bounding swiftly to the window, at which he paused an instant to look back. The Kansas lad lay quite still, the light of the flames flaring fitfully across his pallid features.

For one instant Walter Stark's better nature sought to gain control, for he half started toward the imperiled youth, gasping:

"I can't leave him there!"

Then a little stream of liquid fire ran down across the floor, making a barrier between the two boys.

In a moment Walter turned and leaped through the broken window, abandoning Bart to a fearful fate, for the flames were closing in about the senseless boy with terrible swiftness.

Walter dashed away into the gloom, never pausing

until he was quite a distance from the doomed road house. Finally he turned to look back, and by the light of the flames, which had now broken through the window and were running up the outside of the building, he saw two persons who were acting in a very excited manner. He recognized them as Roger Van Worth and the detective.

"They are looking for Bart Stone," muttered the youth hoarsely, his features hard and set, while he was shaking slightly with a feeling of horror. "They won't find him, for he is in that fire! That ends all trouble with him; but I shall always feel like a murderer. It is terrible! Why didn't I pull him out? I might have done so even after the fire ran down between us. Oh, what a terrible thing!"

For the time he was torn by anguish and remorse, but then it was too late to retrace his steps. He had abandoned the Western lad in a cowardly manner, and now he would have given a year of his life to be able to undo that one mad act.

For some moments he crouched there by the roadside, trembling violently as he watched Mr. Van Worth and the detective running wildly about the burning building. He heard them calling again and again to the missing boy, but only the thunder answered them, while jagged lightning blazed in mockery across the storm-clouds of the western sky.

At length Walter tried to justify himself for his cowardly act by saying:

"He would have done the same to me. He attacked me, and I had to defend myself. I am not to blame. It will be a good thing for father, as I know he feared the boy, who held some terrible secret with which he meant to work father's ruin. No one will ever know the truth, for I can tell any kind of a story I choose."

He did not hear the sound of wheels, and he was quite unaware the burning building plainly outlined his figure to any one who might be passing in the road. All at once, however, a voice called:

"Walt, is that you?"

He whirled quickly to discover his father was near at hand, seated in the carriage.

With a cry of joy Walter jumped the fence and quickly sprang into the carriage, whereupon Stark turned the team about and drove from the old road house.

"I was looking for you," declared the man. "I got away with the team the minute after I leaped through the window, and I did not think I was leaving you until I had driven a short distance; then I immediately turned about and came back. What happened? How did you get away?"

Walter decided to tell his father exactly what had taken place, and he did so. Stark listened with increasing excitement, and when Walter had finished, the man uttered a fierce laugh of satisfaction, saying:

"This is the best night's work you ever did, my son; but you want to keep your mouth closed about it. That boy came East to ruin me, and I believe he might have accomplished his purpose with old Van Worth's aid. Now I will no longer have a fear of either. My son, you have earned all the pin money you can blow in in the next thirty days."

The storm was now coming up with great rapidity, and Stark drove at a furious pace until the ferry was reached, where a man was waiting to take charge of the team.

It began to be certain they could not reach home before the storm broke, for the lightning was now intense, and the thunder bellowed almost overhead.

The Twenty third Street ferry was taken, Stark lighting a black cigar and his son a cigarette as the boat ran out from the slip. There was a look of evil satisfaction on the man's face as he stood looking down at the swirling water, which was ever and anon lighted by fierce flares of lightning; but the boy was still pale.

Finally they turned to go forward. As they did so, an exclamation broke from the lips of a man who had been leaning on the rail, and he started away. A flash of lightning showed Stark the man's face, and he uttered something like a scream of joy.

"Buck Prindle!"

Prindle it really was, and he started to run from Cyrus Stark, a look of fear on his face.

"I'll never go back to that place and stay with the rats!" he gasped, his nerve completely broken by what he had passed through. "Don't you try to touch me—don't ye dare!"

Stark attempted to close in with him, but Prindle leaped to the rail, a crazy light in his eyes, as revealed by the lightning.

"Tell ye I won't go back!" he panted.

"Where are those certificates?" demanded Stark, clutching at the desperate wretch.

"Find 'em!" was the shrill and defiant answer. Then Buck Prindle straightened up, placed his hands together, and plunged headlong from the rail to the black water of the swirling river.

A moment later there was a terrible glare of lightning, by which a white face was seen upturned from the seething river, while two hands battled helplessly with the water. Then, like the bursting of a hundred cannon, came the fearful crash of thunder. The lightning died, the storm broke in all its fury, and the white face was swallowed up in the blackness of the night.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE PANGS OF A GUILTY CONSCIENCE.

“GONE!”

Stark gasped forth the word, as he stared into the darkness, unmindful of the drenching rain that was now falling in torrents.

Again the lightning blazed, showing him the broad sweep of madly rushing river, but the white face had disappeared.

“Oh, what infernal luck!” groaned the man, as he leaned over the rail of the boat and tried to pierce the darkness and storm, still vainly hoping for one look at the face of Buck Prindle—hoping against hope that the man had not gone down forever.

He felt a hand grasp his arm, and Walter’s voice rang in his ear:

“Come, governor, let’s get in out of the rain. We’ll be drenched to the bone if we stay here.”

“You saw him jump?” panted the man. “Is there a chance for him to escape being drowned, do you think?”

“Not one chance in a million,” was the reply. “You’ll never set eyes on that man again.”

“And he is the only person who can tell where the stock of the White Horse Mine is hidden.”

“He’ll never tell.”

Stark was certainly hard hit, for he still remained unmindful of the rain, hanging over the rail to wait for another flare of lightning. It came in a few

seconds, but died out in an instant, giving them no more than a glimpse of the river.

Then Walter forcibly dragged his father beneath the sheltered space allotted to teams.

"What's the use of being a fool, pop?" cried the boy. "He's gone, and gone for good."

"So is the stock of the mine."

"Can't you get around that some way?"

"How?"

"Heep ought to know a way."

The man gave a little exclamation of relief.

"You are right, Walt; that man can do almost anything. He will know a sure way out of it. The only danger will be that the original stock is found."

"But you said Prindle declared it was put where no one but himself could ever find it."

"He did say that, but he may have lied."

"You will have to take your chances. Perhaps it can be fixed so this stolen stock will be worthless, anyhow. I don't know much about law, but that seems possible. Heep will soon settle that point."

"And, if that is right, this will be a great night for me, as my bitter enemy and the only man whom I really feared on earth have both perished."

He ended with a coarse laugh of triumph, his spirits seeming to rise somewhat by the thought.

The boy shuddered, and it was well the darkness hid his features, for otherwise Cyrus Stark would have seen his son was looking at him with mingled repulsion and disgust. Chip of the old block though he was, Walter was not thoroughly hardened, and the laugh of his parent had shocked him strangely.

"If Bart Stone were alive now, he could prove nothing," muttered Stark, scarcely heeding the presence of the lad. "Prindle was the only one who knew."

"You don't mean to say there was anything to know, do you, pop?" questioned Walter. "You did not really have anything to do with old Stone's death?"

"Of course not—no, of course not!" hastily assured the other; but there was something in his manner that plainly told he was lying, and the youth drew back.

Stark noted the move, and he half snarled:

"You did as much this night when you left the boy to be roasted! That——"

"That was something I shall regret as long as I live."

"Of course! of course!" nodded the man. "Your feelings are very natural—and very noble. Still, you were not to blame. You had to save yourself—the fire was between you and the other boy—the loss of a moment might have cost you your life——"

"Wish I could think so," muttered Walt.

"You *must* think so! I certainly did not have anything to do with Prindle's jumping into the river; and you had no more to do with the death of that young Western upstart, who came here to ruin your father. That is common sense."

"Prindle was scared to death—or nearly that—when he jumped into the river. He was afraid of you."

"Still, I shall hold myself in no way responsible for his death; and I feel glad he was fool enough to make the jump. He was nothing but a jail-bird anyway."

They were interrupted by the boat bumping into the slip, and Stark took Walter's arm, starting forward. There were two empty cabs lingering near the ferry house, and the man engaged one of them to take him home.

A spirit of silence had fallen over father and son, and scarcely a word was spoken by either on their way to Thirty-sixth Street. Walt lay back in a corner,

feeling horrified with himself and his villainous father, but still thinking himself a very unfortunate boy, whom fate had conspired against.

Although he felt that at last he was free of his relentless boy enemy and the only man in the world who could lay bare the blackest page of his crooked life, Cyrus Stark was not destined to sleep very well that night. Until a late hour he paced the floor of his room, and when he finally flung himself on the bed, without removing his clothes, it was to toss and twist for a long time before slumber came to his eyes.

When he did fall asleep it was to dream the most fear-inspiring things, causing him to still writhe and groan.

This was the beginning of his punishment for the sinful life he had led.

Walter looked but little better than his father when they met at breakfast, and their eyes were restless and evasive, as if they shared a guilty secret and were ashamed to look each other in the face.

While they ate, Stark glanced over the morning paper, as was his custom. Suddenly he started, gasped, turned pale, and upset the coffee in his great agitation.

"Merciful Heaven!" he hoarsely cried. "It can't be true! I won't believe it!"

"What's the racket, old boy?" asked Walter, with attempted lightness. "You look hard hit."

"Hard hit? Why, Taff, the diamond broker, has failed!"

"Well, what of that?"

"What of it?" almost screamed the man, crumpling the paper and dashing it to the floor. "Why, it was not more than ten days ago that I indorsed his paper for eighty thousand dollars! What of it? I'll have to

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make good that sum! Oh, everything has turned against me now!"

In truth, it seemed that there was a remarkable and mysterious fatality that had hurled all these misfortunes on Cyrus Stark in a bunch, as if to crush him without delay.

Stark no longer had any appetite for breakfast. He lost no time in securing his hat and rushing from the house.

At the Fifth Avenue Hotel he learned that the rumor concerning Taff was true beyond the shadow of a doubt, and then he proceeded down town to consult with Heep, as it would be ten o'clock by the time he could reach the lawyer's office.

There were two elevators running in the building, and something caused him to watch for the other car as he went up in one of them. As they passed about halfway to the top, the man started and gave utterance to a low cry of amazement, for he seemed to catch a glimpse of a well-known face in the other car.

"It can't be possible!" he gasped, unmindful of the fact that the elevator boy was staring at him with wonder. "I must have been deceived by a resemblance."

When he stepped out at the top floor, he waited until the other car came up, and then he eagerly asked:

"Did you just take down a boy about seventeen years old?"

"Yes, sir," was the reply.

"Did you notice anything peculiar in his dress?"

"No, sir."

"Didn't he wear high boots, a woolen shirt and broad-brimmed hat?"

"No, sir."

"Are you sure?"

"Dead sure."

"And he did not appear like a Western boy?"

"I did not notice anything that led me to think so."

Stark looked relieved; slipping a silver quarter into the elevator boy's hand, and then muttering, as he turned away:

"It was all imagination. My nerves are in a bad condition. There can be no reason to doubt Walt. Bart Stone is dead and out of my way forever."

CHAPTER XXIX.

ANOTHER WAGER.

ALTHOUGH Cyrus Stark had not seen Bart Stone in the elevator, the boy from the West was not dead. He had been abandoned to his fate in the burning road house, lying unconscious on the floor, with the fire gathering about him swiftly, but he did not perish in the flames.

Bart had a pretty hard head, and he had soon recovered from the stunning shock received when he went down. He opened his eyes to discover his peril, and roll away from the fire before it fastened on his clothes.

Then he sat up and found escape was cut off, so far as the back door or broken window were concerned. The heat of the fire was intense, and the smoke threatened to overcome him.

He knew better than to rise to his feet, for the smoke was so dense above him he would not be able to catch a breath, so, on his hands and knees, he started to creep toward the open door that led into the hallway.

He was able to reach the door, and then he rose to a crouching position, hurrying toward the front of the house. From room to room he made his way, but all the windows were closed with heavy shutters, and he could not waste time in what might be a fruitless attempt to break them.

The front door was tried, but that was firm as a rock; and then, through choking smoke, he ran up the stairs to the rooms above.

At the back of the house he found a window, from which he quickly broke the glass, dashing out sash and all with one strong kick of his booted foot.

The fresh air that poured in gave him new life, and with a cry of relief and joy he saw a slanting roof just below.

Already was the fire roaring up the stairs of the doomed building, which was destined to become a mass of smoldering ruins in a remarkably short space of time.

Out through the window Bart made his way, lightly dropping to the roof. His feet flew from beneath him, and before he could grasp at anything secure, he slid down the shingles and fell to the ground, striking in an upright position, quite unharmed.

He was at the back of the house, and not a soul had seen him escape, as Mr. Van Worth and the detective were on the side where the window was broken, and the back of the house could not be seen at all from the road.

For this reason, Cyrus Stark drove away thinking the boy he hated had perished in the flames.

As soon as he could collect himself, Bart went round the house to look for Roger Van Worth and the detective. He found them mourning him as lost, and the delight of Roger was something touching to witness. He caught Bart in his arms, and his voice trembled as he declared:

"You are like one from the dead! I could not have suffered more had you been my own boy! But there was no way to get in there through the fire and reach you. How did you get out?"

Bart told him his entire experience, and the man was consumed with anger when he heard how Walter Stark had abandoned the unconscious lad to his horrible fate.

"I suppose it is all that could be expected from the son of such a father; but it was a most dastardly trick! It was scarcely less than murder!"

Stark had escaped his pursuers by darting round the house the moment he sprang through the window, cutting the halter that hitched the horses, and driving away. When they returned to the broken window it was too late to reach Bart, and it was not known but both boys had perished in the fire.

There was now no reason why they should linger in that vicinity, and it was expedient they should get away immediately if they wished to escape questioning, as the light of the fire would certainly draw not a few people to the locality; so they sought the team at once, and were soon driving back toward Brooklyn, which they reached barely in time to escape a drenching.

After waiting until the shower was over, they proceeded to New York.

Mr. Van Worth and the detective held a long consultation that night, and when Carrol left, it was to start after Buck Prindle once more, as everything seemed to depend on finding that man.

"Bart," said Mr. Van Worth, "I want you to keep out of sight for the present."

The boy looked at him in surprise.

"Keep out of sight? What for?"

"I fancy Cyrus Stark and his precious son think you were burned in the old road house, and I want them to continue to deceive themselves in that manner."

"Cause why?"

"I may get another opportunity to spring a surprise on them."

Bart did not object, for he had a great deal of confidence in the judgment of his father's old schoolmate,

and so he remained in the house for the next two days.

Although this was something quite unusual for him, the boy from the West did not find his confinement as irksome and galling as he had expected it would be, for he saw a great deal of Ferda, and she did her best to make the long hours pass pleasantly.

It was on the second night after the fire that Roger Van Worth strolled into the Trojan Club's headquarters and found a fancy shooting exhibition was taking place. An English expert was giving an exhibition, having offered a standing challenge to any member of the club.

Walter Stark was an expert with either rifle or revolver, and after watching the boastful Britisher for some seconds, he accepted the challenge.

As it was to be an exhibition and test of trick shooting, three judges were chosen.

Cyrus Stark was on hand, and he succeeded in making several comfortable wagers that his son would defeat the Englishman, whose name was Curran.

The exhibition was over in about thirty minutes, and Walter was able to win with apparent ease, much to the chagrin of Curran, and the delight of Cyrus Stark, who gathered in his bets and flourished the money over his head, laughing:

"My boy can't be beaten by any amateur in the country! I've got ten thousand dollars that says so!"

Then, catching sight of Roger, he sneeringly called:

"Perhaps you have another Unknown you would like to match against him, Van Worth?"

"Perhaps I have," was the quiet reply. "If so, you should take warning by your previous experience."

The words cut Stark, and he flushed hotly.

"You won by a foul at the race!" he growled.

"That is true," confessed Mr. Van Worth, sweetly. "Your boy should have known better than to make it."

Stark was getting the worst of this bandying of words, and he did not like it, for he could not fail to see the half-concealed smiles of the listening club members.

"Look here, Van Worth," he said, coming closer to the quiet man, "if you're a sport——"

"I am not," was the prompt reply. "I make no claim to that."

"Ha! ha!" sneered Stark. "Your blood is poor, Van Worth. You want the game without the name. I will confess your Unknown did win the sprint by an accident, but I'll bet any sum you like you can't bring an amateur who can whip my boy with either rifle or revolver."

"Now you are getting excited," said Roger, looking the man squarely in the eye. "You seem to be seeking revenge."

Stark stepped still closer, saying, in a tone that was only heard by the other man:

"I *am* seeking revenge! I have not forgotten our meeting at Jarley's! You threatened me with a pistol, and I'll never rest till I humble you for that!"

Then he fell back, lifting his voice until all could hear:

"I'll bet you twenty-five thousand dollars you can't bring an amateur who can fairly beat my son at fancy and trick shooting, Roger Van Worth."

Stark was scarcely prepared for what followed, as the man challenged promptly returned:

"I'll take that bet. Put up your money in Grantham Burke's hands. Here is mine. Cover it—if you *dare!*"

CHAPTER XXX.

WALTER SHOWS HIS SKILL.

STARK was taken aback by this instant acceptance of his loudly offered wager, and he looked not a little astonished, falling away a step and staring hard at the man, who was coolly counting out his money.

"Are you in earnest?" he finally asked.

Roger placed the money in Burke's hands, replying: "This talks."

"What kind of a game are you running now?" harshly demanded Stark, as he nervously fingered the bills in his hands.

"Sir!"

Roger uttered the word in a most crushing manner, a cynical and haughty smile curling his lips. It was enough to bring the hot blood to Stark's face, but he tossed his head with a nervous laugh.

"Oh, I'm on to you," he assured, with insolent insinuation. "You are out to win every time."

Roger took one long step and advanced within reach of the speaker, saying, icily:

"I would like to have you make your meaning a little plainer, Mr. Stark. Come right out and say what you mean, or else be good enough to make no hints."

For a moment it seemed that Stark would give vent to his wrought up passions, but he restrained himself, observing:

"You are very touchy, Van Worth. Are you in earnest about this wager?"

"You asked me that once before. Would I put up the cold cash if I were not in earnest? Cover my money—or take water."

"When is the match to come off?"

"Any time you like."

"Then I set it for to-night within the next hour," instantly returned Stark, as he placed his money in Burke's hands. "Do you come to time on that?"

"Most certainly. I'll have my man on hand in less than thirty minutes."

Stark was astonished at this, but he did his best to appear unconcerned; while Mr. Van Worth hastily scribbled something on a sheet of paper torn from his notebook, sealed it in one of the club's envelopes, and called up a messenger.

When the messenger had been dispatched, Roger employed his time in calmly chatting with several members of the club.

Stark was talking earnestly with his son and Ned Steinway, who was on hand, and the man plainly tried to repress the excitement he felt. Steinway assured him again and again that his time had come to partially square accounts with Roger Van Worth, but he was beginning to grow doubtful, the memory of his former defeats rising vividly before him.

Who did Van Worth intend to produce? He had made no particular stir about the old road-house affair, although both Cyrus and his guilty son had expected trouble. They could not understand why he had not brought a charge of some kind against them, for it could not be he intended to overlook the fact that the boy whom he had befriended lost his life in the fire.

Stark remembered the face he had fancied he saw in the elevator, and a sudden suspicion assailed him. As soon as possible he drew Walter aside, asking:

"Are you sure that infernal boy was cooked in that fire?"

"Sure as I am that I live at this moment, gov."

"Then I cannot understand Van Worth. I declare I half-believe you're mistaken, and he means to produce the young whelp to shoot against you!"

"Oh, you're loony!"

"Then who can he bring forward?"

"Oh, he's got some fellow on the string, and he thinks he can beat you at everything, simply because he did so on the sprint. I'll open the old fool's eyes! My nerve is as steady as a rock, and I can outshoot Dr. Carver to-night."

"I hope you are right. I can't afford to lose another dollar. No more than twenty-five thousand will put me in hard sledding if it slips through my fingers."

"It won't slip. But if you did lose it, you have the mine to fall back on, and you know the expert has made a favorable report."

"Favorable? I should say so! Why, he says the blast that boy put in has opened up a vein of amazing richness; but I shall not feel right about that matter until the lost certificates are recovered. They might pop up any time."

"I don't think. You're a fool to worry about that." Then this highly respectful son lighted a cigarette and strolled into the smoking room with Steinway.

Before thirty minutes had elapsed after the departure of the messenger, word was brought Roger Van Worth that his man awaited him in the parlor. He disappeared at the heels of the person who had brought this information, and every one waited anxiously the ushering in of the mysterious marksman who had been matched to shoot against the club champion for the sum of twenty-five thousand dollars.

The old sports of the club were astounded at Roger, for he had suddenly shown an inclination to sportiveness that had always seemed quite foreign to his nature. Never until he matched the Unknown to run against Walter Stark had he wagered sums of any sort on contests of skill or endurance, although he had ever stood ready to subscribe liberally for the support of any exhibition the club might see fit to give.

A few wagers were made on the outcome of the shoot, but the most of the sports preferred to wait and see the man Van Worth backed before staking any cash.

"Here they come!"

Somebody uttered the words as Van Worth was seen advancing arm in arm with a compactly built, boyish person.

An electric shock ran over Cyrus Stark the moment his eyes fell on that form, while Walter was literally struck dumb with astonishment, turning very pale as he gasped:

"It can't be possible!"

But it was possible. The person Roger had backed against the younger Stark was the boy from the West, alive and well as ever.

"Gentlemen," said Mr. Van Worth quietly, "this is my man, and you will find he can shoot as well as run. This is Mr. Stone, who won the sprint for me."

"It's the chap who roped the panther!" cried one of the spectators. "He's a holy terror, and I think he will give Walt all he wants to do in this match."

The Kansas lad was received enthusiastically, a large number of the club members crowding about to shake his hand.

When he found an opportunity, he turned to Roger to ask:

"What is all this about, I'd like to know right well? You said you wanted me at once, and I came hot foot."

"I believe you said you could shoot?"

"Wa-al, I can—some."

"I have matched you against Mr. Walter Stark for the sum of twenty-five thousand dollars."

Bart whistled.

"Never did any shooting for big money like that," he confessed, looking slightly alarmed. "How'd you dare back me for that thar pile?"

A quiet smile crossed Roger's face, and he answered, in an aside that was heard by no one except Bart:

"Stark attempted to bluff me, and I wouldn't have it. I thought the sight of you might shake Walt's nerve so you would beat him; but it won't make much difference if you lose, as I have not yet cashed Stark's draft, and I don't want it said I did not give him a show. All I ask is that you do your best."

"Wa-al, I'll do that, you bet."

Cyrus Stark did not immediately recover from the shock of seeing the supposed-to-be-dead boy alive.

"Will nothing kill him?" he grated. "You must beat him, Walt!"

The younger rascal had been no less astonished than his father, but he replied:

"I'll do it, pop; depend on me. I'll give him the worst job he ever ran up against!"

In the course of another thirty minutes all arrangements were made for the match. It was decided the start should be plain shooting at a bell target, to see which of the lads could make the most out of a possible seventy-five. A coin was flipped to decide who should lead off, and it fell to Walter.

Young Stark was perfectly cool as he took his place at the rail, a quiet smile on his face. He began shoot-

ing deliberately, and for fifty-eight times in succession he rang the bell. Then he missed once.

"Good boy!" laughed Ned Steinway. "You have already made a score the cow-puncher can't tie."

Neither Bart nor Mr. Van Worth noticed this remark, although it was spoken for their ears.

Walter waited a few seconds, and then quietly resumed the shooting. Ring, ring, ring, steadily went the target bell up to the seventy-fourth shot.

It was amazing marksmanship, as all who witnessed it were obliged to confess. Roger Van Worth looked very grave, for he had scarcely expected such a display of skill. Stark said very little, but there was a look of triumph on his face that told of the satisfaction in his heart.

At the seventy-fifth shot the target bell failed to ring, but Walter had made the amazing record of seventy-three out of a possible seventy-five, and he retired amid the applause of the spectators, a confident smile on his face.

Then there were a great number of offers that the score would not be beaten or tied by the boy from the West, but no one seemed anxious to take them.

As Bart arose, Cyrus Stark laughed in a sneering way, observing:

"I believe the fellow is really going to try it! Ten chances to one he does not make fifty bull's-eyes."

The Kansas lad advanced to the rail, with Roger's whispered words sounding in his ears:

"Do your level best."

He picked up a rifle, looked it over carefully, examined the sights, then suddenly flung it to his shoulder and fired.

The bell did not ring!

He had missed the first shot!

CHAPTER XXXI.

WONDERFUL MARKSMANSHIP.

“MISSED!”

A dozen persons uttered the word in disappointment, for while they scarcely expected Bart to match Walter Stark's wonderful record, they had hoped the Kansas lad would press him close enough to make it interesting.

Ned Steinway laughed aloud, but he made no observation, as that was against the rules after the stranger boy began.

As for Bart, he did not seem in the least taken aback, and something like a scornful smile flitted like a flash across his face, leaving his features as stolid and unreadable as ever.

It would not be true to say Roger Van Worth did not feel disappointed, for he had hoped the Western lad would make a good showing, whether he defeated Walter Stark or not.

Cyrus Stark was chuckling with satisfaction, feeling sure the wagered money was as good as won, for if Bart Stone could do no better than this at plain shooting he would surely make a spectacle of himself when it came to fancy work.

Bart picked up the next rifle, weighed it in his hands, cocked it carelessly, and apparently discharged it quite as carelessly—without lifting it to his shoulder.

Ting! sounded the bell, to the apparent astonishment of every one, Bart included.

"Rung her by accident, by Jupiter!" cried Ned Steinway, following the words with another laugh.

The Kansas lad stared at the target a moment, as if he did not quite comprehend what had happened, and then he took the next rifle offered him by the attendant who was loading.

The spectators saw him carefully scrutinize the weapon, lift it to his shoulder and take deliberate aim, then lower it, shaking his head.

"I don't reckon I'll use that thar thing," he said. "The first two suit me better. Just stand this one out of the way, so she'll not get mixed up with the others."

This caused more than one to smile, but the cowboy was utterly unconscious of their ridicule. He had chosen the first two rifles for use, and would accept no others.

Although he was exasperatingly slow in his movements, it seemed that he fired each time without taking aim, for the muzzle of a rifle would barely reach a level with the target when the weapon spoke.

One, two, three, four, five times he fired, and the bell rang with each shot that followed the first one.

The smiles slowly faded from the faces of the spectators, and they began to look interested. The boy from the West could shoot a little, anyway, and that was all he had claimed.

"He'll miss in a minute," whispered Steinway in Walter Stark's ear.

Six, seven, eight, nine, ten—and still the bell rang with each shot.

Cyrus Stark cleared his throat with a rasping sound, his eyes—which were anything but pleasant features of his face—beginning to snap.

"I am glad he can shoot some," he muttered to a companion, speaking the words just loud enough for

Roger Van Worth to hear. "His backer will feel bad enough to lose the twenty-five thousand, anyway."

A sudden change seemed to come over Van Worth, as if a new confidence was born in his heart. He turned squarely on Stark, and, in a tone that was loud enough for all to hear, said:

"I will go you another twenty-five thousand dollars my man beats or ties your boy on this first trial. Do you take me?"

Stark had scarcely expected this, and he was quite confused. Then he pretended to grow indignant.

"You seem to have developed into a full-fledged gambler all at once, Van Worth. I believe the Trojan Club bars professional gamblers. There is a difference between innocent sport and bare-faced gambling."

Instead of arousing the man's anger, Stark caused him to simply smile.

"Those words sound well from the lips of a man who lost thirty thousand dollars in bets not many days ago," he returned.

Stark was on his feet instantly, almost foaming at the mouth, as he shouted:

"You are no gentleman, or you would not mention that! I believe you are determined on a quarrel. If so, you shall have it! I am not a common tough, and so my weapons may not suit you. Any time you wish to meet me with——"

At this point he was choked off by several of his friends, who saw the affair was really becoming serious, and might end in bloodshed if Stark's passionate tongue were not silenced immediately.

Roger paled a trifle, and his face grew very stern, but it was not necessary for the cautioning words of friends to hold him in check, as he had no idea of forcing a quarrel then and there.

No further words passed between the men, who were now known to be open enemies; and the attention of the spectators was once more given solely to the target shooting.

The Kansas boy steadily added to the score, never missing once after that first shot. The excitement increased, and by the time he had made fifty straight there were a score of persons willing to bet he would tie Walter, and there were no takers of the offers.

Stark's face was ashen in color as he watched the progress of the match. Was it possible this raw Western lad was destined to again defeat his son? He actually began to fear such was the case.

Ned Steinway lost his head and made offensive remarks, hoping to "rattle" Bart in that manner, and he was only silenced by the threat of expulsion from the room.

Sixty shots were fired, and still Bart had missed but once. If he could make fifteen more without a break, he would fairly defeat Walter on the first trial.

"He'll never do it!"

"He is losing his nerve."

"Wait and see him miss in a minute."

These remarks were made with apparent caution, but they were intended for Bart's ears. If he heard, however, he made no sign, keeping steadily at his work.

And he was making no more misses.

In a short time the score reached seventy, and there was but one miss against the Kansas kid. The members of the club looked at each other in amazement, for it scarcely seemed possible an amateur outside of their own ranks could be making such a score.

Seventy-one—two—three; the bell rang each time. Only one miss! Another shot would tie Walter!

The excitement was at fever heat as Bart took an-

other rifle, turned his back to the target, stooped suddenly and fired between his legs.

Ting!

Walter was tied!

The spectators could not repress a cheer, for, although one of their associates had been equaled in skill, they were honest in their admiration.

A more thoroughly desperate man than Cyrus Stark it would have been impossible to find in all New York, for he was now certain the hand of fate was literally set against him.

Only one more shot! If the bell was rung with that, Walter would be defeated.

Again taking a loaded rifle, Bart stood with his back to the target, and when he was ready, spun round on one foot, like a top. At the instant of the second revolution he fired.

The bell rang, causing a great shout to go up from all who heard it, excepting the young marksman himself and the two Starks.

Walter was beaten.

Seventy-four out of a possible seventy-five was something amazing, as every one confessed.

But the contest was not finished, for the trick shooting was to follow. Walter, however, had no taste for further effort, although he did not refuse to do what he could. His nerve was broken by the first defeat, and he failed on many simple tricks which he usually accomplished with ease.

On the other hand, Bart was cool and confident, and he did some things, like cutting hairs and splitting bullets on a knife, that further increased the admiration of the crowd. His final trick was to stand on his head with his feet against a wall and shoot through a tiny paper covered ring held in Roger Van Worth's fingers.

The bullet, it was afterward found, would just pass comfortably through the ring without grazing.

Bart was declared the winner by the committee, and Grantham Burke delivered the amount of the wager to Roger Van Worth, who then sought to hunt up Cyrus Stark, only to find he had left the club, together with his defeated and crestfallen son.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE FAVOR OF FATE.

AGAIN the boy from the West had become the hero of the hour. Every one seemed to desire an introduction to him, and his arm would have ached before he got through shaking hands if it had been made of ordinary stuff.

"Where did you ever run across him, Van Worth?" questioned one curious individual. "Was that panther racket gotten up as an advertising scheme?"

"Well, hardly," was the smiling reply. "There was no fake about that."

"Van Worth is a sly dog," asserted another. "Here he has been lying cold and quiet all these years, and we didn't suppose he was at all sporty. All the time, he was waiting his opportunity to catch us on just such a snap as this."

"You will observe I 'caught' no one but Mr. Cyrus Stark," said Roger, with sudden graveness. "I might have secured wagers with a dozen of you, but I did not."

They could not fail to understand him, for his real meaning was expressed by his manner as well as his words. Cyrus Stark was the game he had chosen, and he cared for no other man's money.

The club members tried to drag Mr. Van Worth and Bart to the café, all of them eager to open wine, but Roger knew the boy would not touch a drop, and so he quietly and firmly declined all invitations.

As soon as possible, the young marksman and his friend left the clubhouse, Grantham Burke having delivered the amount of the wager to Roger.

It was a pleasant night, and they walked along the street together, Roger taking the boy's arm, as he observed:

"Well, Bart, we struck your enemy another blow to-night, and it seemed to hit him harder than any before delivered."

"I reckon that's right, Mr. Van Worth; but while we are pulling that thar critter down, we don't seem to be getting any nearer the recovery of the mine."

"Oh, I don't know about that. He will become desperate pretty soon, and then I have a scheme for bringing him to terms."

"Wa-al, I hope it will succeed; but above all else I want to solve the mystery of my father's death."

"I believe we will finally succeed in that. When we have found Prindle and recovered the stock, if fortune favors us to that extent, I will see what Carrol can do at this other matter. Perhaps he will be able to ferret out the truth in a short time."

"You an't heard anything from Carrol to-day?"

"Yes, I have."

"What?"

"He says Prindle is in this city."

"How does he know that?"

"He did not explain."

At that point the street was poorly lighted and deserted, and three figures suddenly appeared before them, springing out from a dark areaway. Bart was the first to see them and realize there was danger, so he cried:

"Look out thar! Them galoots mean crooked work!"

The warning came none too soon, for, realizing their

evil purpose was suspected, one of the three men snarled:

"Down 'em lively! Don't let 'em raise a row!"

But the ruffians were astounded by a sudden onset from the boy, who did not hesitate to leap at them like a tiger, upsetting one fellow before he could strike a blow.

Although this move on Bart's part had been quite unexpected, the other two sprang to the assault, one of them grating:

"Pound the faces off them! That's all we have ter do! Knock 'em out!"

A second man made a pass at the Kansas lad, who ducked and slipped under the fellow's arm, grasping him about the waist.

Roger Van Worth was no fighter, but he saw it was necessary to do his best in this case, and he met the onset of the third man squarely, receiving a staggering blow and delivering one in return.

In less time than it takes to tell it a fierce fight was taking place there in the street, with the odds against Van Worth and Bart. However, the man and boy were not easily overcome, as the ruffians soon discovered.

The young cowboy possessed amazing strength for his years, and he finally succeeded in throwing the man with whom he had grappled.

But that did not end the battle, for the first man was on his feet, and Van Worth had been knocked down.

At this juncture another individual appeared on the scene and pitched into the thugs like a whirlwind, turning the tide of battle almost instantly, for a signal cry sounded from one of the assailants, and the three immediately took to their heels.

Bart hurried to Mr. Van Worth's assistance, anxiously asking:

"Are you harmed? Have they injured you?"

"Not seriously, I think," was the reply, as the man allowed the boy to aid him in arising. "I was struck a glancing blow by some heavy instrument, but I think I am all right."

"Wa-al, that's right lucky!" said Bart, with relief. "I reckoned it might be worse when I saw you go over. Them p'ison varmint's were out for blood."

"And they would have got it if— Hey, stop him!"

The unknown who had befriended them was slipping away, but, at the cry, the boy darted forward and caught him by the arm.

"Hold on!" he cried. "We want to know who did us that good turn, for we'd got it bad if you hadn't chipped in. You scared them— Great Scott! It can't be! It is—*Buck Prindle!*"

"That's right," confessed the man who had befriended them, finding he could not get away. "I heard old Stark when he hired them blokes to do ye——"

"When he hired them? Do you mean to say Cyrus Stark did that thar dirty trick?"

"That's what I mean. He paid them five apiece to lay for you two here and pound the faces off ye when ye came along. I was in Murphy's saloon an' heard it all, though I didn't let 'em spot me, you bet."

"Wa-al, this is the dirtiest trick yet, by a good heap! But he did us a mighty big favor, just the same, for he helped us find you."

"That is true," put in Roger Van Worth; "and if you are Buck Prindle, we're looking for you."

The ex-convict looked alarmed, seeming on the point

of breaking away and taking to flight; seeing which, Mr. Van Worth hastened to reassure him by adding:

"We do not propose to do you any injury, man; and you can do us a big favor. You have already done us a great favor, for you saved us from those ruffians. I have a fancy you do not love Cyrus Stark much?"

"Love him!" grated Prindle, in sudden passion. "I hate him! I will get square with him some time! He shut me up in that old cellar with the rats, and near starved me to death! Oh, I'll even up, or my name an't Buck Prindle!"

"You're the very man we want to assist us. We will see you are well rewarded."

"All the reward I want is ter square accounts. Stark thinks I am dead, and I'm waitin' the right time to show him his mistake."

"Thinks you are dead?" exclaimed both Roger and Bart in astonishment.

"That's what he does. The very night I got out of the old cellar, he cornered me on the Twenty-third Street ferry, and I jumped into the river. I'd been drowned, but I caught on a floatin' hen-coop that had been dumped from some vessel up the river, and I hung to it till I was pulled off by a tug."

Mr. Van Worth was delighted.

"This is great fortune!" he cried. "If Cyrus Stark thinks this man is dead we will be able to spring a surprise on him that will take away his breath. Everything is coming our way now, Bart, my boy!"

It really seemed as if this were true, and Bart's heart was filled with hope. At last the man who could reveal the secret of his father's death was found, and could he be induced to tell the truth, it would not be difficult to confront Cyrus Stark with an array of evidence that would utterly confound him.

"Will you stand by us, Mr. Prindle?" he eagerly asked. "Will you help us in this yere matter if we'll protect you from Stark?"

"That's what I will, kid," nodded the ex-convict.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

SHATTERED HOPES.

THE three now walked from the lonely street toward a better-lighted thoroughfare, Prindle explaining how he had lured Bob, the guard, into the cellar storeroom, and then, as the fellow was half-drunk, easily knocked him over and escaped.

The outwitted guard had not dared remain and face Stark's anger when the chief rascal appeared, for which reason the old road house had been deserted.

Roger soon hailed a passing cab, which proved to be empty, and they were soon on their way toward the gentleman's home.

Prindle was uneasy, despite the repeated assurances that he had no cause for alarm.

"How about the swipin' of that stock?" he finally asked.

"We will talk about that after we get into the house," said Mr. Van Worth.

A short time after this they were in the library of the millionaire's beautiful home on Madison Avenue. Buck looked with something of admiration at his splendid surroundings, and a strange smile crossed his face as he observed:

"Once I thought I'd make crackin' cribs of this sort a perfession, but it don't pay. A bloke is bound to get pinched and sent up sooner or later."

"That is right," nodded Roger. "The only life to live is a square one."

"Do you think there's a show for a poor chap like me?"

"A show?"

"Yes—a chance for him to do the square—to live honest?"

"Why not?"

"Well, you see I'm known as crooked, and it's hard for a man to get honest work. People don't want crooks around if they know it."

"Are you in earnest about wanting to live like an honest man?"

"I swear I be!"

"Then, when I am satisfied you mean it, I will see you have all the work you need."

Prindle looked at Roger Van Worth in doubt, shaking his head, after a time, as he said:

"It can't be you mean that."

"But I do."

"How can I prove I am in earnest?"

Mr. Van Worth smiled.

"Now you are getting right down to business, my man. I want you to convince me beyond the shadow of a doubt that you really want to lead an honest life, and then I will give you all the opportunity you desire."

"Still, ye have not told me how I can convince ye."

"What is the first thing you would be liable to do if you were really in earnest?"

The ex-convict thought a moment, and then slowly answered:

"Give up that stock I swiped."

"Right!" cried Roger, with satisfaction. "That is the first step. What would be the next?"

"I dunno."

"Then I will enlighten you. The next thing would be to tell how Norman Stone came to his death."

Prindle paled and fell back in his chair, staring hard at the gentleman, whose eyes met his steadily. The convict was shaken by sudden emotion, as both the man and the boy could plainly see; his soul seemed torn with dread and doubt.

Bart was an eager listener to all that passed, well knowing the object at which Roger was aiming, and trusting everything to him.

"In that way," the gentleman went on, noting the look of fear in the ex-convict's eyes, "you can get even with Stark and square yourself with the world."

"I've got enough of prisons!" muttered Prindle huskily. "Ye can't ask me ter blow anything that'll take me back there!"

"So you were mixed in it?" quietly said Roger. "This is certainly very serious, but I don't suppose you directly brought about the man's death?"

"No! no! no!"

"Then I see no reason why you should not turn evidence for justice and be treated with clemency. The chances are you would get off without any punishment."

"Do ye really think so?" eagerly asked the miner.

"I do."

Prindle thought of the matter a long time, his face working strangely, and he finally replied:

"I'll do it! To show ye I'm in earnest, I'll take ye to that stock this night!"

Bart's heart gave a leap of satisfaction, for if he could get the certificates in his hands and the former miner would tell what he knew about the "accident" that deprived Norman Stone of his life, it could not be such a difficult thing to bring about the punishment of Cyrus Stark and secure the mine at the same time.

"Now you have come to your senses," assured Roger Van Worth. "We will start without delay."

Fifteen minutes later they were on the street, and having decided to take a cab, they walked rapidly to Broadway, where a night-hawker's service was secured.

The drive from thence to the Bowery seemed interminable to Bart, who was athirst with eagerness to gain possession of the certificates that actually belonged to him by right of bargain.

At length they left the cab, which was dismissed, and Prindle led the way from the Bowery down into a dark alley in a very disreputable locality.

Finally Prindle boldly pushed open a door and entered a dark passage, followed by Roger and Bart. At the end of the passage another door was opened, and they found themselves in a squalid room, with a hag-gish-appearing old woman sleeping in a chair.

Prindle shook the old woman roughly, crying:

"Wake up, Mother Muggs. I've brought ye cash."

"Hey!" cried the hag, starting to her feet and rubbing her bleary eyes. "What ye want?"

"The same room I had when I was here last," answered the ex-convict.

"Well, it's a good thing that feller got out to-day, else ye couldn't hev it," was the reply. "He was a nice sort of gent, but down on his luck, he said. All the same, he seemed to have plenty of money, and he paid me well. He seemed glad ter git out, though he paid me a dollar extry when he left.

"Cash in advance is my motter," she went on, beginning to gaze in wonder at Roger and Bart. "An' I wants ter know why you brings these people here? This ain't no place for such a grand gent as this man, and——"

She might have rambled on a good deal longer, but Roger thrust a five-dollar bill into her hand, saying sharply:

"Take us to the room at once and this is yours."

For a moment Mother Muggs looked as if she would fall in a faint, and then she grew disgustingly obsequious.

A short time later the trio were alone in a wretched and dirty room, located at the top of the miserable old building.

Prindle lost no time. Placing the smoking lamp with which they had been provided on the floor, he got down on his knees in a corner, first having dragged away the shaky bed. With trembling fingers he loosened a board in the floor and finally lifted it.

Holding their breath, the man and boy saw him thrust his hand into the cavity exposed. A sudden look of consternation came over the ex-convict's face, and he felt around wildly for a moment, finally falling back to gasp:

"Blow me dead if it ain't gone!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

STARK TRIUMPHANT.

"GONE!"

The word broke from the lips of the man and boy who heard Buck Prindle's declaration.

"Yes," returned the ex-convict huskily, "it an't here!"

"Out of the way!" almost shouted Bart, thrusting Prindle aside with a push that sent him sprawling on the floor. "Let me see!"

Down on his knees he dropped, thrusting his hand into the opening and feeling about wildly. He was rewarded by discovering the man who brought him to that room had spoken the truth, for the place where the stock had been hidden was empty. He could touch the bottom and the sides, but the certificates were not there.

Bart lifted a white, despairing face to Roger, who looked scarcely less crestfallen than the boy.

For some moments not one of the three spoke. Prindle was sitting in a kind of dumb stupor on the floor, Bart was kneeling, and Mr. Van Worth stood like an image of stone.

"What does it mean, pards?" the Kansas lad finally asked, speaking with a great effort.

"Are you sure this is the room, Prindle?" demanded the gentleman. "Have you made no mistake?"

"Nary mistake," was the positive assertion. "This is the room, an' them certificates ought to be right there."

"Then somebody has got ahead of us!"

"The galoot Mother Muggs let the room to—the critter as was down on his luck!" cried Bart. "That's the p'ison rascal!"

"Right you are," assented Roger. "That man was here after the stock—he took this room for the purpose of finding it! He was a detective!"

"A detective?"

"Yes; hired by Cyrus Stark! I'll wager I am right."

Bart uttered a groan of dismay, his heart feeling like lead in his breast.

"We're beat!" he said huskily. "Stark is plumb on top the heap this yere time, and I reckon he's likely to stay thar."

Roger saw how hard the boy was hit, and he tried to cheer him up by saying, reassuringly:

"Don't you think so, my lad. Trust to me. I have one last resort of which you do not know, to say nothing of the evidence Prindle can give against the man. Come, let's get out of this wretched place. I can't breathe here."

They descended the stairs and were received by Mother Muggs below, the old woman appearing very much astonished by their appearance. However, she was given no time to make inquiries, for Roger immediately questioned her closely about the last lodger to whom the room was let.

When they left the wretched lodging house there was no longer any doubt but Stark had overreached them and secured the stock; or, if he had not already secured it, it was in the possession of his agent, the detective who had traced the ex-convict's moves up to the time Prindle was captured.

It was impossible to do anything further that night,

and soon they were once more on their way toward Madison Avenue.

Prindle was given a better bed to sleep in than it had ever been his fortune to occupy before, Roger taking care he could not escape from the room and leave the house unseen.

Then the millionaire and his young protégé met in the library once more, and Mr. Van Worth laid before Bart the plan of the last assault on the enemy's stronghold.

The Kansas lad listened attentively, and there was a look of hope in his eyes as the gentleman progressed.

"I have every reason to believe," said Roger, "that fortune has so gone against Stark that the only stocks he now holds are those of the White Horse Mine and the S. P. and N. M. Railroad. The mining stock will not sell for three cents on the dollar until the mine is properly opened up again. Without Stark's knowledge, I have gathered in all the S. P. and N. M. shares I could get hold of, and I now hold a controlling interest in it. It is a rather sickly concern at best, and if I choose to throw my stock on the market in a lump, I can send the price down to a point that will ruin him beyond the shadow of a doubt. Do you see the grip that gives me? To-morrow I will manipulate the market so S. P. and N. M. gets the worst hammering it ever received. That will put our man in hard sledding, and when I come forward with a threat to cast my load bodily on the market, I fancy we will bring Mr. Cyrus Stark to time with a round turn."

Bart knew nothing of such schemes and tricks, but he trusted everything to the generalship of his kind friend, and told him so. They talked until a very late hour, and Bart was unable to sleep after he retired, for he was overpowered by the feeling that the crisis in his

battle for justice would come with another day. By another night he would be either entirely victorious or utterly defeated.

Cyrus Stark and his boy were together in the man's office at ten o'clock the following morning, when the door opened and the Western lad walked boldly in, much to the astonishment of the father and son.

"Mr. Stark," said Bart, quietly, "I have called for that yar stock."

Stark gasped for breath.

"Well, of all the nerve I ever saw! So you have called for the stock?"

"Yes, sir. I believe you received it last night?"

"That I did, though it gets me how you know so much about it. I put up a little bluff about having it before, but my detective discovered it yesterday and turned it over to me last night. Here it is."

He opened a drawer and took out a rubber-strapped package, which was triumphantly flourished before the eyes of the young cowboy.

"If you are a man of honor," came calmly from Bart's lips, "you will deliver them thar certificates to me and accept this yere money. You know I purchased them fairly."

The man laughed sneeringly.

"If I were a fool, I would do so. No, my boy, you can't have them, and you may as well give up the struggle, for you are fairly defeated."

"Not *fairly* defeated, sir; and I do not propose to give up, as you will soon discover. If you do not deliver that stock, you will be a ruined man this coming night. You hear me shout!"

"Well, of all the insolent brats I ever saw! Get out—get out of this office!"

"You refuse to deliver?"

“Yes! Get out!”

“All right. I’m going. You’ll remember what I just said before this yere day is over. That’s all.”

Without another word, the Kansas lad turned and walked out of the office as calmly as he had entered it.

CHAPTER XXXV.

COALS OF FIRE.

WALTER STARK had remained a silent witness of the interview between the boy from the West and the triumphant speculator and schemer. There was a strange look on Walter's face, and he seemed struggling to overcome certain feelings that sought to rise within him.

"Ha! ha!" laughed Cyrus, when Bart was gone. "That young whelp has nerve to tell me I will be a ruined man by night!"

Walter said not a word, but taking his hat, hurriedly left the office.

Down the single flight of stairs he bounded, quickly reaching the street. He was in time to see Bart walking away with a swinging stride, and he immediately started after the Kansas lad.

At first it seemed as if Walter would overtake Bart in a few minutes, but the young cowboy was soon joined by Roger Van Worth, and the pursuer fell back.

Still he followed along, although he scarcely knew why he was doing so. He saw the man and boy talking together earnestly as they walked through a side street toward the elevated railroad.

All at once Walter was startled by a sudden shout of alarm, and he saw people running swiftly from the locality, some of them waving their hands wildly to him.

"Look out! Run! run!"

Realizing there must be some great danger, he started to get away, but something came swirling through the air with a rattling sound, and he was hurled to the ground. A crash followed, and he found himself held fast by a staging that had fallen from a new building which was being erected.

Walter was about to thank his lucky stars he had not been killed, when, glancing upward, he saw a spectacle that filled him with unutterable horror.

The building was a poor affair, and the fall of the staging was simply a sort of forewarning of what was to follow, for the whole front wall of the structure was slowly bulging outward.

In less than a minute it must fall crashing into the street, and the unlucky boy, held helpless by the staging, would be instantly crushed to death.

It was remarkable the agony of that terrible moment did not turn Walter's hair white as snow. He seemed to see the heavy bricks and stones bulging outward inch by inch, and he expected the whole wall to come thundering down at any second.

Through his brain flashed one thought:

"This is my just punishment!"

Then he realized how desperately wicked he had been, and he shuddered at the black stain he seemed to behold on his own soul. He remembered how the boy from the West had saved him from destruction beneath the express train, and how he had rewarded him by leaving him to the mercy of the fire that was consuming the old road house.

It seemed he suffered all the agony of eternal punishment in the awful moment when this passed through his mind. Then came the thought that he would give anything to live to square himself—to wipe away the black stain.

Another great shout went up from the crowd, for a figure suddenly dashed forward beneath the shaking wall, unmindful of the appalling danger.

Walter saw a person come springing to his side, and then, to his infinite amazement, he recognized Bart Stone. "You'll be killed!" he gasped.

If Bart heard the words, he did not heed them, for, with a remarkable display of strength, he grasped the fallen staging and wrenched it from the prostrate lad. Then, without the loss of a second, he caught Walter up, flung him over his shoulder, and ran from the spot, hearing a wild burst of cheers from the spectators.

Down came the wall with a crashing roar, literally shaking the ground, and filling the air with dust and debris, in the midst of which the two boys were swallowed up from view!

The cheers from the crowd were silenced in an instant—changed to groans of horror.

"They have been killed!" cried scores of voices.

And then out of the blinding, swirling cloud of dust staggered the boy from the West, still bearing Walter Stark on his shoulder; reeled forward, stumbled, recovered himself—reached a place of safety! Then Walter, saved from instant annihilation by the boy he had so shamefully treated, was placed on his feet, stunned and confused, but practically almost unharmed.

Again the spectators cheered, but some of the poor laborers had been crushed in the collapsed building, and the attention of the crowd was soon turned from the two boys.

"Thar!" panted Bart, as he brushed the dust from his eyes and looked at Walter; "I kind of judge I didn't yank ye out of that too sudden—none whatever."

The face of the other boy was ghastly pale, but he managed to gasp:

"Did you know whom you were saving—for whom you were imperiling your life?"

"Wa-al, I knew when I got to yer, if I didn't know before."

"Then why didn't you leave me there?"

"That yere an't my way of doing business, pard," was the reply.

"But I left you for the fire. Didn't you think of that?"

"Yes, I thought of it."

"And still you pulled me out! I don't understand."

At this juncture, Roger Van Worth came hurrying toward them, crying:

"My dear boy, I feared you were crushed! That was a brave act—a noble act."

"Oh, that thar wasn't much," protested Bart, who feared he was to be overwhelmed with praise. "It wasn't nothing like riding across the front of a stampeded herd and picking up a baby that would have been run down by the critters—and I done that once."

"Who did you save? Where is he?"

"Right hyar——"

But Walter had disappeared into the crowd that was surging around the spot.

"He's gone!" exclaimed Bart, in astonishment. "It was Walter Stark."

"That worthless young rascal!" cried Roger. "You took your life in your hands to save him, and he did not even thank you! He will simply await his time to do you an injury as reward!"

In the meantime Walter was moving swiftly from the spot, his mind filled with a turbulent vortex of emotions. He was overwhelmed with shame and disgust for himself, for which reason he had slipped away from his rescuer, whom he could not face.

Straight to his father's office he hurried, staggering in at the door and dropping limply into a chair.

"Goodness, Walt!" cried the elder Stark, in alarm. "What has happened? You are white and trembling, besides being covered with dirt. You followed that Stone brat from the office. Has he——"

"That Stone brat, as you call him, just saved my life," returned the boy, in a shaking voice. "But for him I would have been crushed beneath the walls of the new Douglas Building, which has just collapsed."

Then he told the whole story from beginning to end, while the man listened with horror and dismay.

"That is just our infernal luck!" stormed Stark at the conclusion. "Why couldn't it have been somebody else who saved you?"

"Because it was the will of fate that coals of fire should be heaped on us by the boy whom we have both treated shamefully," exclaimed Walter. "Look here, governor, are you going to do the square thing by him?"

"The square thing?" gasped Stark, in astonishment. "What do you mean by that?"

"Are you going to give him the stock that really belongs to him? Are you——"

"What?" screamed the man, rushing madly about the office. "You are crazy! You have turned against your own father! Get out of my sight instantly—get out, I say!"

And the enraged man actually drove his son from the office.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

STARK'S DEFIANCE.

AT twenty minutes past three on the afternoon of that same day Cyrus Stark, his face pale and drawn, was pacing wildly up and down his office, while Jubal Heep vainly tried to quiet him.

"What's the use, Stark!" exclaimed the lawyer, rubbing his hawk-like nose with his forefinger. "It's all over for to-day, and——"

"To-morrow is coming, and I may be a ruined man fifteen minutes after the Exchange opens!"

"The tide may turn in your favor."

"It will not! I am sure of it!"

"Oh, you can never tell anything about luck."

Stark paused and faced Heep squarely, crying:

"Luck? Do you imagine for a moment this is luck, man? If you do, you are a fool!"

The lawyer's face flushed, but he could not afford to resent the plain words of this man who had put thousands of dollars into his pocket, so he spoke as quietly as possible:

"What do *you* think?"

"I do not *think* anything about it; I *know* somebody has engineered this deal against me. S. P. and N. M. was unmercifully hammered. Somebody unloaded on the market, and nobody dared buy, so the stuff took a fearful slump. See just when this thing happened! Why, if it had been at any other time, I could have gathered in everything in sight, and that would have

kept quotations up and stopped every petty stockholder from getting in a panic and flinging all they held of the stuff on the market. As it was, I drew to my last dollar. I tell you fate is against me, and there is no hope! To-morrow will finish the job!"

"Be calm, Stark! You are working yourself into a fearful condition."

"Calm? How can a man be calm with ruin staring him in the face? You talk like an idiot, Heep!"

At this moment the door opened and Walter Stark entered. His face was very grave, and he seemed about to say something, but at sight of him, Stark began to rave still more furiously.

"Here is a son to be proud of! Look at him! Even he has turned against his father!"

Walter did not resent this, but he asked, his voice hoarse and unnatural:

"Is this report in circulation about you true, father?"

"What report?"

"It is common talk that you are on the brink of ruin."

That was enough to put Stark in a perfect frenzy of passion, and he certainly seemed like a maniac for the next few minutes.

"It is the work of my enemies!" he snarled, literally gnashing his teeth. "That infernal Kansas brat hoodooed me! I have had nothing but the worst kind of luck since he appeared!"

"Perhaps it is a case of retribution," said Walter, coldly. "Did you ever injure his father or mother in——"

With a terrible scream, Stark rushed at the boy and struck him in the face with his clinched fist.

"Shut up! Do you dare talk to me like this?"

Walter staggered, and then he calmly took out a

handkerchief and held it to the place where his father's fist had left its mark. There was a strange look in the boy's eyes—a look that did a great deal to quiet Cyrus Stark.

"I will not forget this, sir!" said the younger Stark. "You——"

He said no more, for the door opened again, and Bart Stone strode into the office, walking straight toward the man against whom he had waged a relentless battle. Stark suddenly cowered and fell back before the Kansas lad, huskily asking:

"Well, what do you want now?"

"I have your draft for one hundred thousand dollars, made payable to bearer. At five minutes before three this yere afternoon I presented it at the bank, and they 'lowed you didn't have any funds corraled thar. I have come to you for the cash, and I reckon you'll find it healthy to pan out right lively."

Stark sat down on a chair, a sneering look settling on his face, as he returned:

"I suppose you have that check I gave Van Worth?"

"Wa-al, you're right."

"I decline to pay it."

"'Cause why? It is made payable to bearer."

"I know it, but I think I'll just let you whistle for it."

"Then I reckon I'll bring suit against you tomorrow, Mr. Cyrus Stark. Maybe that'll bring ye to your senses."

"Go ahead, you young whelp! That was in payment of a gambling debt, and no man can be forced to pay such debts by law."

"That thar's all right, but you have paid it with a worthless check, and I reckon it puts you in a bad hole."

"Go ahead and do your worst!"

"Give me the stock of the White Hawse Mine, and this yere draft is yours."

"Never! Do your worst!"

Bart walked quietly to the door and opened it, calling:

"Mr. Van Worth."

Roger sauntered into the office, nodding shortly to Heep and speaking to Stark:

"How do you do, sir. I was waiting outside to see if the boy could make a deal with you. I infer he has failed, but I may be able to bring you to your senses."

"Bah!" sneered the speculator. "You'll find me the hardest man you ever tackled!"

"Possibly I can bring you to time. To begin with, I will tell you just what we want: You must deliver up the certificates of the White Horse Mine stock, and you must also make a complete confession of the truth relating to the death of Norman Stone."

Stark arose to his feet, his face purple with fury.

"Get out of my office!" he grated, grinding his teeth. "Get out before I do you injury!"

Roger looked him steadily in the eyes, returning with the greatest deliberation:

"When we leave this office, we will have all we demand. This is the end of the game, Mr. Cyrus Stark, and you are beaten. You will soon realize that. Listen: To-day you were nearly swamped by the slump of the S. P. and N. M. I was at the bottom of that, and I accomplished my purpose—I brought you to the very door of ruin. I could have snowed you under if I had desired, for I hold a controlling interest in the S. P. and N. M. I chose to show you my power, and then give you a chance to save yourself. That is why I am here."

"How kind!" sneered the cornered rascal, with a desperate attempt at bravado.

"If S. P. and N. M. drops five points to-morrow morning, you are a ruined man," Roger went on, deliberately. "Unless you come to terms without delay, I shall instruct my brokers to unload as soon as the Exchange is opened in the morning. All I have will be dumped on the market in a lump, and you can imagine the result."

Stark's face was very pale, and he made one or two unsuccessful efforts to speak. Finally, he managed to huskily ask:

"If I give up the White Horse Mine will you agree to hold the S. P. and N. M. shares now in your possession and deliver that draft to me?"

"I will agree to hold what I have and gather in all afloat if you deliver the White Horse certificates and sign this confession."

Roger produced a typewritten paper and handed it to Stark, who hastily read it through, the look of mingled rage and terror deepening on his face.

"What is your answer?" demanded Mr. Van Worth.

"*This!*"

Stark tore the paper in two and flung it, a crumpled mass, into Roger's face, almost shrieking:

"I defy you!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

VICTORY AT LAST.

THAT Cyrus Stark was in earnest in his defiance there could not be a doubt, and still Roger Van Worth did not give up defeated.

"Sir," he said quietly, "that is the confession of Buck Prindle. He was in the White Horse Mine and saw Norman Stone walk to his death. You were there and saw it also. Prindle had fired the blast, and you were at his side when you saw Mr. Stone about to enter the passage. A word of warning would have kept him from going to his death. Prindle would have cried out to him, but you put your hand over the miner's mouth, whispering in his ear for him to be silent. And so you let Norman Stone go to his death."

"Ha! ha!" sneered Stark, forcing a laugh. "That is a very fine tale to tell, but it is all rot, *rot!* It is something you have concocted to injure me."

"Prindle was supported by you for a time after this," Roger continued. "He had a hold on you, and you feared him. When he got in trouble in Chicago, you took pains to have him sent up for a good long period, all the while pretending you were his friend and were trying to save him. Now he has been pardoned, he has made this confession."

"You tell it very nicely," said Stark, putting on a bold front. "But let me tell you, Mr. Roger Van Worth, I propose to bring suit against you for defama-

tion of character. Perhaps that will silence your slanderous tongue."

"When I am done with you, you will bring no suit," came sternly from Roger's lips. "You will find I can prove all I have to say."

Stark had already been badly shaken, but he stiffened up once more, crying, derisively:

"Prove it! How can you prove it?"

"By Prindle's confession."

"That won't go, man. I do not believe Prindle ever made such a confession—and he lied if he did."

"What if I show you his confession, properly made out, signed, and witnessed."

"You can't."

"That is where you fool yourself. Here it is. Examine it, and see if it is genuine."

Roger took another document from his pocket and placed it in Stark's shaking fingers. The man's eyes ran over the written words and rested on the signature at the end. The gaze of all within the office was fixed on him, and they saw him suddenly rend the paper into fragments, while he shouted:

"How much good will your confession do you now, you fool! You were not very sharp when you allowed me to take it in my hands! Where is your proof now?"

"I will have to produce Prindle himself," was the quiet retort.

"Ha! ha! ha! That bluff does not go. Prindle cannot be produced, my dear man."

"Why not?"

"He is dead."

"Do you think so?"

"No, I do not think so—I *know* it."

Bart Stone had quietly walked to the office door, and he now stood with his hand on the knob, listening to

all that passed, and watching Roger Van Worth. He seemed to be awaiting a signal.

"Buck Prindle is within sound of my voice," declared Roger, with great impressiveness. "He lives, and he is——"

"*Here!*"

The boy from the West suddenly flung open the door, and into the room walked the ex-convict, followed by a uniformed officer.

Cyrus Stark stood like one turned to stone, his eyes staring, his face ghastly in hue. Not a sound came from his parted lips, but the look of horror he wore told that he imagined himself confronted by one returned from the dead.

Prindle faced the chief scoundrel squarely, and a breathless silence reigned in that room.

The silence was broken by a horrible sound—a gurgling groan that was like a death rattle. Then Cyrus Stark pitched forward on his face, striking the floor with a heavy thud, and making no further move.

Roger Van Worth dropped on his knees beside the man, turning him over and ripping open his coat and vest to feel beneath them.

Jubal Heep aroused himself from a sort of stupor, caught his breath with a rasping sound, and then cried:

"Somebody go for a physician—quick! Stark is dying!"

"It is too late to save him," declared Roger Van Worth solemnly. "He is already dead!"

The day following Cyrus Stark's funeral Bart Stone received a message inviting him to call at Jubal Heep's office at two o'clock in the afternoon and bring Roger Van Worth with him.

Promptly at the appointed hour the man and boy en-

tered the lawyer's office, to be received with a great show of cordiality by the obsequious Heep.

"I am pleased to meet you again, Mr. Stone—how do you do, Mr. Van Worth? Have seats, gentlemen. Mr. Walter Stark should be on hand now. I am sure he will arrive in a few moments."

"Our time is valuable," asserted Roger. "The appointment was made for two o'clock."

"I am aware of it, gentlemen, and I regret any delay, I assure you. Still, I think it will pay you to wait a short time. I am sur— Ah! here is Mr. Stark."

Walter came in slowly. His face was haggard and his eyes blood-shot. His appearance seemed to indicate he had scarcely known sleep for days.

He half hesitated, looked at the man and boy, then removed his hat, and made a bow. His lips moved as if he would speak, but he seemed to change his mind, for he said nothing.

Walter walked to Heep's desk and made a movement the lawyer seemed to understand, for he opened a small safe at his back and took out a package. This package was placed on the desk, and then Walter faced Roger and Bart again, speaking huskily.

"My father is dead, and the fight is ended. Still, Mr. Stone has not obtained his just and lawful rights, for I am satisfied the White Horse Mine belongs to him. The entire certificates of the old stock are in this bundle. As soon as the mine is properly opened up again this stock will be gilt-edged. Mr. Heep tells me I can hold it for all of anything you can do, but I have decided that that would be unjust, not to say criminal. I now deliver this stock to Mr. Stone, and trust it may bring him more happiness than it ever brought to my poor father."

He walked up to Bart and placed the bundle in the hands of the Kansas lad. Then Walter returned to the desk, speaking once more:

"I wish to apologize to Mr. Stone for my treatment of him. I am aware my acts were reprehensible and I realize his nobleness. Twice he placed his own life in peril to save mine, the second time after I had abandoned him to the flames in the old roadhouse. I think it was that last act which opened my eyes to my own meanness of soul and his nobility. I have been ashamed of myself ever since, and I now humbly ask his pardon."

"Wa-al, I'd be meaner than a mule if I didn't grant it after this yere!" cried Bart promptly. "I don't hold any hardness, pard, and thar's my paw to prove I's squar' in saying so!"

He strode forward and held out his hand. Walter hesitated a moment, and then grasped it, his chin quivering and a suspicious moisture dimming his eyes.

"You are white!" he huskily exclaimed—"white to the bone!"

Last year the White Horse Mine was opened once more by a stock company of which Roger Van Worth was the president, although Bartley Stone held the bulk of the stock. The rediscovered lead proved remarkably rich, and the stock of the concern was soon quoted at a premium. The quotations have risen gradually since then, but there is at the present time not a share to be purchased. It is not on the market at any price.

Buck Prindle is employed in the mine, and he seems in earnest about wishing to live an honest life.

After the loss of Cyrus Stark's patronage, which was ended by death, Jubal Heep was soon forced to give up

his office in the expensive building and retire to cheaper quarters. In less than a year he was located on the Bowery, and scornfully termed a "shyster" by all who knew him. Wilson disappeared altogether.

Ned Steinway is the same worthless young dandy, his great object in life being to become known as "a dead game sport" and man-about-town.

Walter Stark learned his lesson, and he cut clear of Steinway and his ilk, greatly to his advantage. He made a resolution to become a man among men, square and upright, and the prospect looks encouraging at the present time, for, finding his father had left nothing behind, he obtained a position in a wholesale commercial house, and has been advanced until he is now shipping clerk in one of their largest departments.

Ferda Van Worth is just as pretty and vivacious as ever, and she firmly believes her father the grandest man in the world, and Bartley Stone the noblest boy that ever lived.

As for Bart, he is proud of Ferda's esteem, and in his heart there is an undying friendship for her that may ripen into a stronger attachment in the years to come.

Bart's mother, a sweet-faced, white-haired lady, is now enjoying the comforts of life, of which she was temporarily deprived by the perfidy of Cyrus Stark. Her heart kindles with joy and her eyes glow with pride whenever she thinks of her only son, and the noble record he has already made.

"God has been very good to give me such a boy!" she murmurs day after day.

For all of past shadows, the world looks bright to her, as it also does for the Boy from the West.



